

The identities of transracially adopted adolescents in South Africa: A dialogical study

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## Declaration

This whole thesis, unless otherwise stated in the text, is the product of my own original work.

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## Abstract

Using the theory of the dialogical self, this study aimed to understand the identities of a sample of transracially adopted South African adolescents. Particular attention was paid to the identity domains of race and adoption, as well as the impact of relationships on the formation of individual identity. In-depth interviews were conducted with four transracially adopted adolescents and their parents. The voice centred relational method (Brown and Gilligan, 1992) was used as the method of analysis. Results of this research support many assumptions of the theory of the dialogical self and suggest that there is a dynamic relationship between internal and external positions within the self. In addition, the results show that the participants have developed racial and adoptive identities characterized by conflicting positions within the self, which may be mediated by relationships with significant others. Issues specific to the South African context, including language and poverty, also appear to bear significant influence on the identities of the participants.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

An estimate of the number of South African children orphaned by HIV/AIDS suggests that there are currently between 800 000 and one million orphans in South Africa (Mental Health Practice, 2002). By 2015, this figure is projected to be four times bigger, with “an estimated 4 million children, or about 10% of the entire South African population orphaned” by HIV/AIDS (Madharan, 2004, p. 1443). In addition, “there is growing consensus that the extended family system is no longer capable of providing for orphans, given severe economic constraints” (ibid). As it becomes necessary to find alternative care for some of these orphans, transracial adoption is likely to become an increasing reality in South Africa.

Transracial adoption is the adoption of a child by parents who belong to a different race group to that of the child (Whatley, Jahangardi, Ross & Knox, 2003). Research on transracial adoption suggests that it generally yields positive outcomes. That is, when compared to children in general, and in-racially adopted children specifically, most transracially adopted children have good levels of adjustment as indicated by positive self-esteem and no evidence of psychological disorders or behavioural problems. However, much of the literature on transracial adoption argues that transracially adopted children may have difficulty developing positive racial identities and there is significant debate in this regard. Despite this debate, there is a gap in the literature in terms of describing the identities of these children, and in defining some of the identity-related issues with which they may struggle. In addition, much of the literature fails to make explicit the assumptions of identity on which this assertion is based. It appears that the main assumption is that in order for a racial identity to be positive, it must necessarily be integrated and coherent. In addition, there seems to be an assumption in the literature that a positive racial identity is one that matches the racial identity of individuals from the birth culture to which the transracially adopted child belongs. These assumptions are consistent with traditional conceptions of identity. In line with this more traditional assumption of identity, much of the literature both on identity in transracially adopted children specifically, and identity development generally, uses concepts that must be operationalised and measured, such as self-esteem.



More recent research on identity suggests that identity is a complex and dynamic process that cannot be captured in a simple construct such as self-esteem. Contemporary approaches to identity are therefore critical of attempts to operationalise and measure identity, assuming that an individual's identity is capable of change over time. An alternative narrative conception of identity assumes that identity is fundamentally formed within relationships with people. It recognizes the importance of context on identity formation, and pays attention to the systems of relationships in which people grow up. A theory of identity based on relationships is therefore more able to capture the complex nature of identity in children who grow up transracially adopted. This research aims to summarize the results of existing research on the racial and adoptive identities of transracially adopted children, and to describe the identities of the participants of this research using the theory of the dialogical self. In combination, it is hoped that a greater understanding of the racial and adoptive identities of the transracially adopted participants will be obtained.

Much of the literature on transracially adopted children is based in Britain and America, countries with very different contextual factors to South Africa. Since there is not much literature on transracial adoption in South Africa, an exploratory and interpretive research project aimed at describing and understanding the identities of transracially adopted children in South Africa from a narrative perspective could contribute valuable insights into the phenomenon, and is the basis upon which this research is justified.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter will begin by describing and critiquing a traditional conception of identity as theorised by such authors as Erikson and Marcia. This will then be contrasted with a theory of identity known as the *dialogical self*, which seeks to address some of the criticisms of Erikson's (1983) theory of identity. Included in this discussion of identity are the more specific identity related issues of racial identity and adoptive identity, both of which are discussed from a theoretical perspective. Existing research into the adjustment of transracially adopted children will be discussed and the second section is a problematisation of the issue of the racial identities of transracially adopted children. Following this, some general research on adoption will be discussed, including attachment issues that adopted children may face. This will be discussed in relation to transracially adopted children. Finally, the research on transracial adoption will be discussed in relation to its relevance to the South African situation.

#### **2.2. Traditional theories of identity**

Before beginning a discussion on the identities of children who have been transracially adopted, it is necessary to examine the issue of identity from a theoretical perspective in order to assess the factors which may represent a unique challenge for such children. The focus of this discussion is therefore on the various theoretical formulations of identity as well as on how best to conceptualise and define the notion of identity.

Erik Erikson (1983) wrote extensively on the topic of identity and his theory of identity has had a large impact on the field of psychology. As such, it is fitting that a discussion on identity should begin with Erikson's (1983) theory of human development (Meyer, 1997). Erikson (1983) framed human development in terms of eight stages, each stage comprising a central task that needs to be completed in order for the individual to successfully move onto the next stage. As each task is confronted, the child may choose between two different ways of responding to the

challenge. Erikson defined these different ways of responding in terms of a polarised choice and felt that healthy adaptation is achieved when the individual is able to find a balance between the two possible ways of responding to the developmental challenge, or crisis (Meyer, 1997).

Erikson assumed that individuals experience “a lifelong effort to know themselves and to achieve congruence between their self-image and the social aspects of their lives (like membership of groups and acceptance by others)” (Meyer, 1997, p. 205). This assumption of human development is central to the assumption that Erikson makes about the nature of identity, and how identity is formed. Erikson argues that as children move into adolescence at approximately the age of twelve, personal factors such as their growing sexual maturity and increasing cognitive capacity; coupled with societal factors, such as pressure to make a career choice, force children to question the assumptions that they have made about themselves and their place in society. This uncertainty and questioning characterises the adolescent’s search for identity, and resolution of this uncertainty is the central task of the adolescent period. Thus, the challenge at this fifth stage of development is referred to as identity versus role confusion, and refers to the individual’s task of finding a balance between his or her own desires and societal expectations and opportunities. Identity is therefore resolved once the adolescent manages “to integrate all their identifications, drives, wishes and expectations, abilities and skills, with the opportunities society offers them” (Erikson, 1963, in Meyer, 1997, p. 219). According to Erikson then, identity is: “...a complex concept which can be defined as people’s images of themselves, including the feeling that a thread of continuity runs through their lives, and that their self-images and the views others have of them are essentially in agreement” (Erikson, 1963, in Meyer, 1997, p. 219).

The above discussion illustrates Erikson’s assumption that a positive identity is characterised by integration and continuity (Hermans, 2001b) in three different spheres. Firstly, a positive identity is characterised by the individual’s ability to consolidate the desires and images they have of themselves, with the images and expectations that others have of them. Secondly, a positive identity is characterised by the adolescent’s ability to maintain this image of themselves across time, to find coherence and continuity between their past, their present and their future. Lastly, successful identity formation is accomplished when the adolescent is able to establish a

coherence and consistency across different contexts, between the various roles that they play in society. McAdams argues that “adolescents... are making a deliberate attempt to reconstruct inconsistencies into a continuous world view and pose the basic question: Is there a real Me behind the different roles I play?” (2001, in Hermans, 2001a, p. 46). Thus, the degree to which an individual achieves integration and continuity determines the success of their identity formation.

These assumptions regarding what constitutes a positive identity are important, as they are the foundation upon which much research into the issue of identity has been based. Significantly, results of this research suggest that a good personal identity is associated with many benefits. Phoenix suggests that “people who have scored high on measures of identity development have consistently scored better on measures of psychological and social outcomes such as self-esteem, health maintenance, and greater intimacy in and higher satisfaction with interpersonal relationships” (2001, p. 349). Further, the consequences of a child having a problematic identity are assumed to be that they may be vulnerable to such things as low self-esteem, anxiety and depression (Marcia, 1980, 1993, in Phoenix, 2001). Baumeister illustrates the relationship between identity and self-esteem, arguing that, “people with low self-esteem have self concepts that are confused, self-contradictory, inconsistent, incomplete and ill-defined” (1995, p.80, in Phoenix, 2001, p.349). Thus an identity that lacks coherence and consistency is largely assumed to be problematic.

The significance of these findings in relation to transracial adoption is that children who have been transracially adopted are more likely to have self-concepts that are not coherent and that are characterised by ambivalence and inconsistency. Children who have been transracially adopted have to assimilate their adoptive status into their identity (Frasch & Brooks, 2003). In addition, they have to develop a racial identity in the absence of the normal socialisation processes that children of colour usually have when reared by same-race parents. Thus it is likely that forming an identity based on integration and coherence will be a unique challenge for these children. According to the literature then, this would place these children at risk for such things as low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

Another theorist who has worked extensively within the field of identity is James Marcia (1966, in Dunkel & Anthis, 2001). Phoenix (2001, p. 350) suggests that “Marcia’s ego-identity status paradigm is an extension of Erikson’s (1950) eight-stage theory of psychosocial development (and has) been the basis for the majority of empirical research on identity development and psychosocial outcomes in the past 30 years”. The significance of Marcia’s work has therefore been that he developed a way of operationalizing and thus assessing, identity (Yoder, 2000).

Marcia speculated that identity formation need not necessarily culminate in either a positive or a negative identity, but that individuals may engage in the identity formation process in different ways, and may develop qualitatively different identities as a result. On the basis of research, Marcia suggested that there might be four different styles of approaching the identity formation process. These four styles are based on the qualities of exploration and commitment, i.e., the degree to which an individual has explored his or her identity, and the degree to which an individual has committed him or herself to “identity-defining roles and values” (Kroger, 2000, p.145). These four styles were termed identity statuses and have been used extensively in empirical research (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001). Significantly, research suggests that most individuals participate in a dynamic process of identity exploration and that most individuals achieve an identity based on commitment to social roles. In addition, research suggests that one can expect individuals to most vigorously explore their identities during their late teens and early twenties (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001).

### **2.3. Criticisms of this traditional conception of identity**

There are several criticisms of both Erikson’s and Marcia’s concept of identity. Theoretically, Erikson acknowledged the role of society in the formation of individual identity, especially in terms of the expectations and opportunities that society provides for adolescents. In addition, he acknowledged the effect that culture may have on identity formation, by highlighting the impact that one’s place in history can have on one’s identity formation. In this regard, Erikson suggested that one “cannot separate personal growth and communal change” (Erikson, 1963, p.23, in Yoder, 2000, p. 95). However, Flum and Lavi-Yudelevitch (2002) argue that despite this theoretical assumption, research has largely focussed on the intrapsychic processes involved in

identity formation, neglecting the role of society and relationships in the formation of identity. Yoder (2000) supports this argument, and suggests that research and theory have traditionally neglected the role of context on identity formation, in particular the fact that many children confront barriers that may limit their process of identity formation. He argues that “assumptions of a singular and definable context in which adolescent identity formation occurs, however, discount the effect of external socio-cultural influences upon internal psychological processes and unfairly place much or all of the responsibility for successful identity task completion on the individual” (Yoder, 2000, p. 95). Thus, a central criticism of much of the empirical research on identity, and the theory that has arisen from it, is that it has taken individuals out of the contexts in which they live and has not given enough credence to socio-cultural issues.

Another major criticism of this traditional view of identity concerns the assumption that at the core of each individual lies an identity that is characterised by integration, autonomy and continuity across time. This criticism is a post-modern criticism, with the central argument being that there is no such inner core, or basic truth that lies whole, and at the heart of, each individual (Raggatt, 2000).

Lastly, Tappan (2005) argues that past research on identity has either focussed too exclusively on the individual, or too exclusively on sociocultural issues. Both approaches are inadequate as they reduce the experience of identity development to simplistic notions that do not fully account for the richness of the experience. Tappan suggests that “we must find a way to live in the middle, and thus avoid the perils of both individualism and social reductionism that have plagued the human sciences for years” (ibid, p. 51).

#### **2.4. An alternative view: The theory of the dialogical self**

In light of these criticisms, Hermans and Kempen (1993) developed the notion of the dialogical self. Drawing on the work of James (1890, in Hermans, 2001a), and his theory of identity as well as on Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic novel. In addition, Hermans and Kempen’s (1993) theory of the *dialogical self* is based on narrative assumptions of the self, and attempts to find a balance between a conception of the self that is coherent and integrated, and a more post-modern

theory of the self, where identity is characterised by fragmentation. A brief explanation of the work of James and Bakhtin (1929/1973, in Hermans, 2001a) will be given in order to illustrate the principles on which the theory of the dialogical self rests.

James suggested that individuals possess both a subjective identity, which is internally experienced, as well as a more objective identity, which is characterised by the social roles that they occupy (Hermans, 2001a). James termed the subjective identity *I* and the objective identity *me*. James argued that the *I* position or what he termed the “self-as-knower” is subjectively experienced as having three different qualities. Firstly, the self is experienced as possessing a sense of continuity and integration across time and across various social roles and contexts. Secondly, the self is experienced as being distinct from others, as standing separate from other people. Lastly, the self is experienced as possessing a sense of volition. That is, the self is experienced as being a dynamic negotiator in the world, an “active processor of experience” (Hermans, 2001a, p.47). This subjectively experienced self, termed ‘self-as-knower’ or ‘self-as-subject’ is contrasted with the more objective self, which James termed the ‘self-as-known’. To illustrate this distinction, Raggatt (2000, p. 68) argues that “James (1890) distinguished a singular, autonomous and continuous ‘I’ or ‘self-as subject’, from a potentially large number of ‘Me’s’, ‘social selves’ or ‘self-as-object’, which were defined by various social roles and attachments”. Thus, there are many *me* positions, or social roles, that a person may occupy and these roles may not necessarily be in harmony with one another. However, these social roles are subjectively experienced with a sense of continuity and coherence.

Significantly for the development of the theory of the dialogical self, James implied in his theory of the self that the self is not necessarily contained and disconnected from its environment. Rather, a persons’ sense of identity may be connected with all those things that an “individual may call his or her own” (1890 in Hermans, 2003, p.97). Thus, James argued that an individual’s sense of identity consists “not only (of) his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and his bank account” (James, 1980 in Hermans, 2003, p. 97). The significance of this suggestion is that it represented a shift in conceptualising the self as separate from others and the environment, to conceiving of the self as being affected by and extended towards the environment (Hermans, 2003). Thus, James

offered the notion that there may not be a strict and inflexible boundary between self and other. Whilst James did suggest that the self is experienced as distinct from the other, this small shift in thinking paved the way for Hermans and Kempen to develop the theory of the dialogical self, in which the self and other are bound together in a dialogical relationship. It is through this conception of the dialogical relationship with the other that Herman's and Kempen's theory of the dialogical self builds a bridge between individualism and social reductionism.

Hermans and Kempen built on the work of James, but were further influenced by Bakhtin and his notion of the polyphonic novel, which in turn was based on the work of Dostoyevsky (1929/1973, in Hermans, 2001a). Bakhtin suggests that a polyphonic novel is one in which a central, singular character occupies the position of many different characters, each with their own story. These characters and the stories that they tell are not necessarily in harmony with one another, and some may even be in conflict with one another. In this regard Hermans (2001a, p.52) argues that "in Bakhtin's (1929/1973) terms, each character is 'ideologically authoritative and independent' (p.3), that is, each character is perceived as the author of his or her own ideological perspective, not as an object of Dostoyevsky's all-encompassing artistic vision". It was this concept of the polyphonic novel and the possibility of an individual having autonomous and different subjective identities, some of which may or may not be in conflict with one another, that inspired Hermans and Kempen's theory of the dialogical self.

Lastly, Hermans and Kempen (1993) based their theory of the dialogical self on narrative assumptions. Hermans (2001a) argues simply that, "the basic assumption is that people have a story to tell about themselves and the world and that the events in one's life receive meaning as parts of a narrative or autobiographical structure" (Hermans, 2001a, p.50). This seems to be the essential assumption of a narrative approach, which is illustrated by Brockmeier and Harré (1997, p. 264) who suggest that: "the point of departure of the new narrative interest in the human sciences seems to be the 'discovery' in the 1980's that the story form, both oral or written, constitutes a fundamental linguistic, psychological, cultural and philosophical framework for our attempts to come to terms with the nature and conditions of our existence". In other words, Brockmeier and Harré (1997) suggest that we organise and make sense of our lives,



the world we live in and even our identities through narrative, through talking with ourselves and with other people.

The strength of a narrative approach to the self is that it understands the self and the concept of identity as being a complex and dynamic construct. It is critical of the notion that one's identity should remain stable across time and context. Thus, a narrative view of identity is critical of the idea that it is possible to operationalise identity or measure identity in any accurate or significant way. Research aimed at establishing whether or not children have a positive identity and whether or not this is linked to good self-esteem, would be deemed static. It is assumed that individuals are capable of change over time and across different contexts, and so any measurement of identity is likened to a snapshot, which merely captures an individual in a certain place at a specific time. A narrative view of the self is also critical of a simplistic, cause-effect approach to identity, and assumes that each individual has a unique story to tell, with potentially different themes and plots. Thus, a narrative approach to identity is critical of attempts to reduce identity to formulaic rules, such as: 'people with a positive identity are more likely to have a good self esteem', or 'people with a negative identity are more likely to feel depressed or anxious'. From a narrative theory of the self, it would therefore be possible for an individual to have a more diffuse personal identity, one that is not characterised by coherence, and yet still have a positive sense of their own identity and be psychologically healthy.

Tying together narrative assumptions with the work of James and Bakhtin, Hermans and Kempen formulated the dialogical self in the following terms. This definition of the dialogical self encapsulates the assumptions of dialogical human functioning that are made in this research:

The *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The *I* fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The *I* has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story. Once a character has been set in motion in a story, the character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As

different voices these characters exchange information about their respective *Me(s)* and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992, pp. 28-29, in Hermans, 2001a, p. 54)

Thus, the assumption of the dialogical self is that one's identity is narratively structured and that the self is organized in terms of a collection, or repertoire, of positions. Each position is independent of the other with its own unique story to tell, but each position is also capable of engaging in dialogue with other positions. Fragmentation, in the form of a multiplicity of independent and subjectively experienced positions, is compromised with integration, in the form of the potential to dialogue between each position (Hermans, 2003). In this way, the theory of the dialogical self celebrates an identity that is characterized by diversity and difference whilst maintaining a sense of integration. As such, it is an appropriate theory of identity with which to understand the identities of transracially adopted children in South Africa.

## **2.5. The organisation of the dialogical self**

It has been argued that a dialogical conception of the self assumes that the self has many subjectively experienced positions that have the potential to be in conflict with one another, but that avoid fragmentation through their capacity for dialogue. In defining the term 'positions', Hermans (2003) suggests that it is used in order to emphasise that the self is a dynamic construct that is experienced differently depending on its location in time and space. That is, the self does not remain constant and unchanging but is mediated by one's place, or 'position' in context. It has been suggested that the self consists of many positions, what has been termed a repertoire of positions. The following discussion will look more closely at this repertoire of positions, providing a greater and more detailed account of the nature and organisation of this repertoire.

Hermans suggests that there are several ways in which the self is organised. In this regard, he argues that "the spatial term position always assumes the existence of one or more other positions, and therefore, a multiplicity of positions and their mutual relationships are included in an organised repertoire" (2003, p. 101). Thus, we are able to see that there is a spatial organisation of the self, and not merely a temporal organisation of the self. The basic assumption

therefore is that different aspects of the self may be experienced simultaneously, and not merely one after the other.

Hermans (2001c) makes a distinction between internal and external positions, and argues that the self is organised in terms of a multiplicity of both internal and external positions. For the purposes of this research, internal positions are those experiences of self that are experienced as residing within the self, for example, I as a psychologist, I as empathic, and I as angry. External positions refer to those aspects of the environment that are experienced as 'mine', for example, my patients, my family, my friends. This differentiation of self and other via internal and external positions does not imply a split between self and other. Rather, self and other are intimately connected. In this regard, Hermans argues, "it should be emphasised that the theoretical term 'I' position is not exclusively used for the internal domain of the self. Also, the external positions, as parts of an extended self, are conceived as 'I' positions, that is, the other is conceived as another I. Thus others are not merely objects in the environment with which 'I' interact. Rather, my interaction with others changes my subjective experience of myself and through this means, the other is incorporated into the self" (2003, p. 103). Significantly, the boundaries between internal and external positions are open, accommodating different cultural experiences of selfhood. In this regard, Hermans argues that: "In line with this argument, it should be noted that the distinction between internal and external positions, with highly open boundaries between the two domains, acknowledges any fusion between internal and external positions representing a we" (Hermans, 2003, p. 105)

In addition to the organisation of the self in terms of internal and external positions, the repertoire of internal and external positions is hierarchically organised. By this it is meant that not all the positions in the repertoire of the self have equal power or salience. Rather, some positions may be more dominant or subordinate than others. However, the ability of the self to change over time and context means that this hierarchical organisation is fluid, and has the capacity to change. Positions that have salience at one point in time may change according to the individual's position in time and context. The potential of the self to change over time and across different contexts is referred to as the concept of 'innovation' (Hermans, 2003). In this regard,

Gregg suggests that “the self has open boundaries that may be widened and restricted depending on changes in time and situation” (1991 in Hermans, 2003, p. 100).

In a similar light, some positions are experienced as more familiar and comfortable than other positions. This is what Gregg (1991 in Hermans, 2003) refers to as the identity-in-difference organisation of the self. Hermans argues that:

As part of a multiplicity of positions, the one position is more familiar, accessible and safe than the other position. The familiar position is most directly expressed by the word ‘I’...However, when less familiar, and perhaps more threatening positions enter the realm of the self, these positions may be suppressed or even split from one’s self-definition. In that case, sharp boundaries are drawn around one or a few highly centralised positions and any dialogical interactions with boundary positions are precluded. (2003, p. 99)

The above discussion illustrates that the self is organised in terms of internal and external positions. These positions differ in the degree of power they may have within the self as well as the degree to which they feel comfortable and familiar to the self. When the self experiences a position as too uncomfortable, boundaries may be drawn around the position that causes anxiety, and dialogue with that position may be restricted. However, the concept of innovation suggests that the self has the capacity to change over time and place due to the fact that there are open and flexible boundaries between the different positions in the self.

## **2.6. When identity becomes problematic: The pathology of the self from a dialogical perspective**

Much of the literature on transracial adoption argues that transracially adopted children may struggle to form positive racial identity. However, it has been argued that the theory of the dialogical self celebrates an identity that may potentially lack coherence and integration. In this way it has been suggested that the theory of the dialogical self is an appropriate theory from which to understand the identities of transracially adopted children in South Africa. The significance of the following discussion on the pathology of the self lies in this area of debate

within the transracial adoption literature. From a traditional perspective of identity, problems with identity would be conceptualised in terms of a lack of integration or continuity within the self. This has already been criticised. However, it remains important to have an understanding of the pathology of the self from a dialogical perspective in order to provide a framework for understanding any identity-related difficulties that the transracially adopted children in this research sample may have.

Theorists have speculated that an individual's dialogical organisation may become problematic or pathological under two possible conditions. Firstly, an individual may encounter psychological difficulty and may require clinical intervention when the organisation of their positions is such that one position is overly dominant, silencing other positions (Goncalves & Salgado, 2001). In this regard, Hermans argues that "an important reason for changing an existing repertoire (of positions) is when power differences between positions are so strong that the dialogical potential of the system is seriously reduced or relevant voices do not get an opportunity to be heard" (2003, p. 112). Secondly, it is possible that individuals may experience psychological difficulties if they experience dissociation of one of their positions (Goncalves & Salgado, 2001). This may be likened to the psychoanalytic concept of splitting, a defence mechanism where one does not feel a connection or sense of ownership over an aspect of one's self or personality. This would be similar to the scenario that has already been discussed, where boundaries are drawn around anxiety provoking positions, and the dialogical potential of that position is reduced. However, this degree of dissociation would represent an extreme form of what Gregg (1991 in Hermans, 2003) termed the identity-in-difference organisation of the self. Lysaker and Lysaker (2001) support these two conceptions of psychopathology from a dialogical perspective arguing that "for many, the experience of psychosis can be conceptualised as a breakdown of dialogue between the self and others" (p. 27). Referring specifically to their case study, a young man diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, they suggest that:

He had previously been someone who was ambivalent about his lover, a caring person with a paradoxically sadistic sense of humour, someone who heeded his father's approval whilst resenting his father's weakness. With the onset of F.'s psychosis, all of this collapsed. Suddenly his access to other positions was clicked or derailed. The constant

shifting of ideas/ voices of the self that Hermans (1996) and Gregg (1995) described ceased. F. had strictly one voice: he was the victim of a persecutor. (ibid, p. 27)

Thus, this person lost the capacity for flexibility and became fixed in a particular position.

## **2.7. The role of the 'other' and the dialogical self in relation to culture**

Having criticised the work of Erikson for focussing too exclusively on intrapsychic processes, and having suggested that the theory of the dialogical self addresses and accommodates this criticism, it is important to further examine the ways in which the theory of the dialogical self does this. Specifically, in examining the impact of external processes on the formation of individual identity, it is necessary to examine two issues. Firstly, the impact of other people, as individuals, on the process of individual identity formation. Secondly the impact of culture, as a collection of individuals, on the formation of individual identity formation. The notion of culture may be understood in several ways. Firstly, culture may be understood as an independent variable, the impact of which may analysed and understood separately from the individuals and groups on whom it impacts (Miller, 1997). This view of culture may be critiqued for reducing the inherently complex relationship between individuals and culture. As a response to this critique, another understanding of culture is that it is a process that may not be removed from the people who use it. Rather, the relationship between individuals and culture is a reciprocal one, with mutual fields of influence (Miller, 1997). The position taken in this research is that the latter understanding of culture more accurately captures the complex notion of culture. Significantly, by including 'the other' in its conceptualisation, the theory of the dialogical self avoids the tendency towards individualism characteristic of many traditional theories of identity.

Firstly, the theory of the dialogical self accommodates the role of others in individual identity formation through the concept of external positions within the self. Thus, the voices and opinions of other people resound in an internal dialogue, affecting how we feel about ourselves and affecting our identity. In this regard Hermans suggests that "I'm able to construe another person or being as a position that I can occupy and as a position that creates an alternative perspective on the world and myself" (2001b, p. 250).

Secondly, in explaining the role of culture in the conception of the dialogical self, Hermans (2003) suggests that:

Cultures can be seen as collective voices which function as social positions in the self. Such positions or voices are expressions of historically situated selves that are, particularly on the interfaces of different cultures, constantly involved in dialogical relationships with other voices. At the same time, these voices are constantly subjected to differences in power. (p. 96)

In situating culture within the individual, Hermans weaves a collective culture into the very essence of individual identity. By conceiving of it in terms of a dialogical relationship, with mutual fields of influence, Hermans avoids a reductionist view of the relationship between self and culture.

It is significant to note that transracially adopted children sit on the interface between cultures. The South African context is a unique one, and South African children on the borders of cultures are faced with unique issues that children in such countries as America and Britain are not. The strength of maintaining a perspective of identity based on the dialogical self is that it is able to accommodate the impact that different cultural and historical forces have on identity. In this way, the theory of the dialogical self will have the potential to make space for the particular stories that South African transracially adopted children are likely to tell.

## **2.8. Criticisms of the theory of the dialogical self**

Some of the criticisms of the theory of the dialogical self rest with the assumptions on which the theory is based, and the kinds of methodological problems that one may encounter whilst doing research. The problem seems to be an issue of how to go about writing about individual identities from a dialogical perspective whilst still remaining true to the assumptions that constitute the foundations upon which the theory is based.

Firstly, one of the assumptions of the theory of the dialogical self is that whilst engaging in conversations with others, individuals take a particular position in relation to that other person. It is assumed that this position is one of many available to an individual and that the individual has the capacity to use an array of different positions flexibly and in response to different people. As such, any process aimed at exploring the range of positions available to a given individual becomes problematic. Ideally, the position that a research participant would take in relation to a researcher would be fairly objective, enabling the researcher to gain a more-or-less transparent account of the various positions from which an individual acts. However, if one of the strengths of the dialogical self is that it fundamentally assumes that individuals are dynamic actors who are able to be flexible across different contexts, and in relation to different people, then what we gain from an interview with any participant is merely a moment in time that has been captured and not a true reflection of the variety of positions that they occupy. Goncalves and Salgado argue that “we suspect that a possible hidden assumption is present: that we can assume a meta-position, from which the person (engages in the interview)” (2001, p. 371). Since it is consistent with the assumptions of the theory that this is probably not the case, gaining a rich and relatively accurate description of the many aspects of the identity of any individual becomes extremely difficult. It therefore becomes important for the researcher to consider from what positions the participant is speaking from at the time of the interview, and the ways in which this might affect the data that is gained. Similar to this argument is another argument proposed by Goncalves and Salgado (2001). Goncalves and Salgado (2001), argue that the danger in labelling the identities of individuals from a dialogical perspective is that the reification of their identities might occur. They suggest that “we face the risk of suggesting to clients that it gives a true reflection of the person, instead of particular constellations of I-positions in an ever-changing self-space” (Goncalves and Salgado, 2001, p. 371). Although Goncalves and Salgado (2001) use this argument specifically in relation to the clinical use of the dialogical self it is a relevant concern in the context of this research. Thus, it is important to remember the snap-shot like quality of our interviews and to be cognisant at all times of our assumption that identity is fluid and dynamic.



## **2.9. Racial and adoptive identity**

The following discussion will explore the specific issues of racial identity and adoptive identity. These are two specific identity related issues that are addressed in the literature which are both relevant to the construction of identity in transracially adopted children.

### **2.9.1. Racial identity**

Before engaging with the issue of racial identity, a brief definition of the concept of race is warranted. Helms (1994 in Pope-Davis & Liu, 1998) suggests that there may be three differing definitions of race, each one encompassing increasingly broader notions of race. In the first instance, race may be defined narrowly on the basis of biology, referring to groups of individuals who share psychical features that differentiate them from other groups of people. In the second definition, this biologically based definition is broadened to include the “socio-political history and experiences of domination and/or subjugation” (Helms, 1994, p. 298 cited in Pope-Davis & Liu, 1998). The last definition of race likens race to the notion of culture, suggesting that individuals of a particular racial group are individuals who share cultural customs and values that distinguish them from other people (Helms, 1994 in Pope-Davis & Liu, 1998). One can see from the above definitions that the concept of race need not be tied simply to a biological understanding of race. Rather, a richer understanding of race, and the one that is used in this research, acknowledges that race is “rooted in the sociohistorical and cultural context of the time; while the physical markers (e.g. skin colour) may remain the same, the meanings attributed to it may fluctuate according to the social context” (Omi & Winant, 1994 cited in Pope-Davis & Liu, 1998).

Forming a racial identity is one of the tasks of any individual. The following discussion outlines and critiques some of the important contemporary theories of racial identity development. Many contemporary theories of racial identity development conceptualise racial identity development in terms of stages. One such theory will be outlined as an example.

Cross (1980, 1987, in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000) suggested that the process of developing a racial identity is a four-stage process. This is an American model and has been developed by researching the experiences of African American people. The model starts with the “pre-encounter” stage. At this stage of development, young children of minority races have not begun to be consciously aware of their racial identity. They have not actively engaged with forming a racial identity that is distinct from the dominant culture that they are exposed to and as such, identify with the dominant culture, which is usually defined as a Eurocentric, or ‘white’ culture (Cross, 1980, 1987, in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000). At this stage of development, children identify with role models from the dominant culture and hold beliefs and values that are espoused by the dominant culture (Tatum, 1997). The exception to this lies with children whose parents are “race-conscious”, actively promoting minority race values and beliefs, and providing race appropriate role models for their children that counteract the dominant social messages that children receive. The second stage is known as the encounter stage and is usually precipitated by some form of racism or discrimination that forces children to examine their racial identity. The encounter stage is characterised by an increasing awareness of having a separate racial identity that is different from that of the dominant culture and a conscious examination of their own culture. Tatum (1997) suggests that this stage often coincides with developmental processes, such as reaching puberty and confronting issues such as dating. In the third “immersion” stage, Cross (1980, 1987, in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000) suggests that children become committed to their culture and their specific racial identity. During this stage of extreme racial consciousness and pride in their own race, children may denigrate the dominant culture with which they previously identified. The last stage is termed “identification”, and involves the final resolution of racial identity. During this stage, children are able to move from the extreme position of the immersion stage to a point where they are able to appreciate differences between races. At this point, Cross suggests that “children become able to appreciate themselves and others as individuals” (1980, 1987, in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000, p.77). Frasch and Brooks (2003) argue that “individuals in this stage have reconciled their conflicts between African American and majority culture, have an African American reference group orientation, and evidence security and openness” (p. 203). Thus, the final and ideal stage that children should reach in terms of their racial identity is one that is free of conflict and confusion regarding their racial identity.

The above quote illustrates that this theory, and in fact, many theories of racial and ethnic identity are very much based on an African American experience and very little research has been conducted in order to empirically assess their suitability to the South African context. One exception is research conducted by Korf and Schoeman (1996) to assess the relevance of Milliones's theory of racial identity in the South African context (1980 in Korf & Schoeman, 1996). Milliones's theory is based on the work of Cross (1971) outlined above, and the two theories share numerous similarities in the stages that they address. Korf and Schoeman (1996) suggest that Milliones's (1980) stage theory of racial identity might be partially relevant in the South African context. Most of the stages seem to be applicable to black South Africans, although there appear to be subtle differences in the last stage: that of 'identification' in Cross's (1971) model, termed 'integration' in the model of Milliones (1980 in Korf & Schoeman, 1996).

However, stage theories of racial identity development have been criticised for over-simplifying the process of identity formation. Root (1990) suggests that "ethnoracial identity is not a fixed ending point, but rather a fluid, flexible structure involving a circular process that may change over time depending on age, changes in environment, and other factors" (cited in Frasch & Brooks, 2003, p. 204). Other theorists have argued that racial identity is not something that is crystallised during adolescence, but is rather a life long process (Cross, Strauss & Fhagen-Smith, 1999 in Frasch and Brooks, 2003).

Finally, Cross et. al. (1999 in Frasch & Brooks, 2003) also argue that individuals will differ in terms of the strength of their racial identity. They suggest that a strong racial identity is the implied positive outcome of the stage theories of racial identity development, with weaker racial identities being viewed as a deficit, or problematic in some way. Importantly, Frasch and Brooks (2003) caution that people working with transracially adopted children should not "assume that one aspect of the child's overall identity, such as being an adopted person or being a child of colour, is necessarily more salient than other aspects. Development is dynamic and what is most salient at one development stage may matter less at others" (p. 211). Alternative theories of racial identity have been put forward in order to accommodate some of these criticisms.

### **2.9.2. Adoptive identity**

The development of an adoptive identity has been defined as the way in which an “individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption” (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Lash Esau, 2000, p. 381). Much of the literature on adoptive identity is based on Erikson’s theory of identity, which assumes that it is in adolescence that most identity issues related to adoption are engaged with. Frasch and Brooks (2003) speculate that this period of identity formation is harder and more complex for adopted children as these children once again confront the loss associated with their adoption. In addition, they argue that these children have additional identity related tasks, including “exploring feelings around the possibility of searching for birth parents or family and remaining able to openly discuss adoption related issues with parents” (ibid, p. 208). However, Grotevant et. al. (2000) argue that “although the identity task may be more complex for adopted than for non-adopted persons, this does not imply that there is anything pathological about it” (p. 382).

Grotevant et. al. (2000) base their assumptions about adoptive identity on the work of Erikson, arguing that achieving coherence and integration of identity is the main task of the development of an adoptive identity. These are consistent with the more traditional assumptions of identity that have already been discussed and critiqued.

The literature suggests that the nature of an adopted child’s relationship with his or her birth family may have an important effect on the identity of that child (Frasch & Brooks, 2003; Grotevant et. al., 2000). The level of contact that an adopted child has with his or her birth family seems to be mediated by adoption policies existing in the country at the time. Internationally, there has been a shift from favouring closed adoptions to favouring open adoptions (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998 in Grotevant et. al., 2000). In closed adoptions, the birth family’s identifying details are kept secret, whereas in open adoptions, the details of the birth family are made known to the child, and contact between the child and the birth family is permissible. This contact may exist along a continuum, from very little contact, to a lot of contact. Grotevant et. al. (2000) argue that “the shifts in policy regarding openness in adoption are likely to have an impact on the processes involved in adoptive identity development” (2000, p. 381). Frasch, Brooks and Barth

(2000, in Frasch & Brooks, 2003) speculate that children in open adoptions benefit from the knowledge of their birth family, and are more easily able to actively engage with an adoptive identity. In contrast, they suggest that “children in traditional, closed adoptions, experience identity conflicts and confusion in adolescence because they are not able to understand themselves in relation to their biological heritage” (p. 206). Thus, an adopted child’s knowledge and contact with his or her birth family is likely to play an important role in the development of that child’s adoptive identity. However, Grotevant et. al. (2000) also argue that where adoptions are open and children are able to have relationships with both their birth family and their adoptive family, it is important that both sets of parents communicate and collaborate in the best interests of the child. As with children whose parents are divorced, children in open adoptions seem to adjust better when parental collaboration is good.

Grotevant et. al. (2000) argue that the adopted child’s relationship with his or her birth family may further affect the child’s adoptive identity in more specific ways. Where the adoption is open, and the child has knowledge of, and possibly even contact with, their birth family, several identity related issues might emerge. For example, the extent to which there is stigma around the child’s conception and birth (for example, if the child was conceived out of marriage or if the child’s biological mother was very young), the child will have to reconcile their adoptive identity with the knowledge of the circumstances surrounding their conception and birth. In some situations, children who are removed from their birth families at an older age due to abuse and neglect are more likely to have difficulty attaching to their adoptive family, and there is a greater chance that their adoption will be disrupted. In such cases, it is possible that an adoptive identity may be one that is constructed around feelings of rejection and abandonment (having experienced rejection from both their birth family and their adoptive family). Grotevant et. al (2000) also argue that changing social trends in adoption will affect the way in which adoptive children think and feel about themselves. In this regard they argue that there has been an increase in the number of single people adopting, in the number of gay and lesbian people adopting, and in the number of transracial and intercountry adoptions. These varying forms of adoption will all impact on the adoptive identities of the children involved, although they do not suggest the specific ways in which this might occur.

Some of the literature on adoptive identity is concerned with the issue of salience. Salience refers to the varying degrees to which identity related issues are important for different individuals. Thus, Grotevant, Dunbar and Kohler (1999) argue that:

The importance or prominence of adoptive identity differs across individuals. While some individuals engage in a great deal of intense reflective thinking about their status as an adopted persons and the meaning that identity holds for them, others devote relatively little thought to the identity and its meaning. This range in behaviour falls along a continuum of *salience* of adoption. (cited in Grotevant et. al., 2000, p. 382)

With respect to the earlier point on the impact of closed and open adoptions on identity, the literature suggests that children who are involved in a closed adoption may engage with their adoption more, and that the salience of their adoptive of their adoptive identity may be greater than children involved in open adoptions (Grotevant et. al., 2000).

Some researchers argue that assimilating an adoptive identity may be affected by gender. Girls may have a more complicated process of identity formation as they struggle with more identity-related issues than boys do. Importantly, girls appear to engage with an identity based on social roles as well as an identity based on relationships. On the other hand, boys seem to focus more on an identity based on social roles. In this regard it is suggested that “if and when boys try to integrate their adoptive identity with other important aspects of their life, they may encounter more difficulty than girls do because they have less experience integrating relational and social identities in general” (Grotevant et. al., 2000, p. 383).

## **2.10. Transracial adoption**

The following discussion will focus on a review of the literature related specifically to transracial adoption. This includes the adjustment of transracially adopted children; the question of racial identity in transracially adopted children and factors which might affect the adjustment of transracially adopted children.

### **2.10.1. Transracial adoption and adjustment**

Transracial adoption may be defined as “the adoption of a child from a race different from that of the adoptive parent” (Whatley et. al., 2003, p. 323). In South Africa, transracial adoption was legalised in 1994 (Crowe, 1995) and typically involves the adoption of a black child, by white parents. Much of the research into transracial adoption has focussed on the issue of adjustment in transracially adopted children. That is, research has focussed on assessing whether or not transracial adoption prevents children from adjusting as well as inracially-adopted children or children who are raised in their birth homes.

Adjustment has been similarly operationalized in most research on the outcomes of transracial adoption. Generally, adjustment has been determined by the presence or absence of behavioural problems both at home and at school (Rushton & Minnis, 1997; Tizzard, 1991 in Vonk 2001); whether or not there has been a disruption in the adoption; the quality of the child relationships with peers (Rushton & Minnis, 1997); whether or not the child experiences educational problems; the level of the child’s self-esteem (Rushton & Minnis, 1997; Tizzard, 1991 in Vonk 2001); and the quality of the child’s relationships with his or her adoptive family, including parents, siblings and extended family (Tizzard, 1991 in Vonk, 2001).

Shireman and Johnson, (1986, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996) conducted a longitudinal study of transracially and inracially adopted American children. They used several measures of adjustment and concluded that transracially adopted children were as well adjusted as inracially adopted children. In America, McCroy and Zurcher (1983) found no differences between the self-concepts of transracially and inracially adopted children. Also in America, Simon and Alstein (1987, in Bagley, 1993) found that these transracially adopted children displayed the same levels of adjustment as both inracially adopted children and children who had not been adopted, but were living with their birth parents. This finding suggests that transracial adoption yields the same levels of adjustment as any other form of parenting and is supported by research by Feigelman and Silverman (1984, in Bagley, 1993). Silverman and Feigelman (1984, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996) also found that family opposition to the adoption, as well as the age

of the child at adoption, were largely accountable for maladjustment in children who were transracially adopted, as opposed to transracial adoption itself.

Conducting research in America, Vroegh (1997) suggests that most transracially adopted children achieve good levels of adjustment. In this regard, Vroegh argues that “research indicates that most of the transracial adoptees who were placed as young children and have now reached adolescence are developing without the problems predicted by opponents of transracial adoption” (Vroegh, 1997, p.568). This argument is supported by many researchers who contend that even without exposure to their culture of birth, transracially adopted children are likely to show good levels of adjustment (Gill & Jackson, 1983, in Bagley, 1993). In Britain, Bagley (1993) conducted a longitudinal study of transracially adopted children. They concluded that there are no particular adverse effects of transracial adoption on later adjustment, and that there is no evidence to suggest that children waiting for adoption should not be placed into families of a different race (Bagley, 1993).

#### **2.10.2. Transracial adoption and racial identity**

The above research suggests that transracially adopted children are likely to display good levels of adjustment. Despite this, there has been much debate around the issue of transracial adoption. Hollingsworth (1997, p. 100) summarises this debate, commenting that “most of the controversy has centred around whether transracially- or transethnically-adopted children are able to develop the racial or ethnic identity which is characteristic of the identity of members of their racial or ethnic group”. The assumption in the literature is that children who are transracially adopted need to be able to develop identities that are the same as the racial identities of members of their birth culture. Failure to do so is assumed to result in a negative racial identity. McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale and Anderson (1982) found that transracially adopted children had good self-esteem compared to children adopted into same race families, but that they did not have a strong sense of racial identity. Previous assumptions had suggested that self-esteem and racial identity were positively correlated (Hollingsworth, 1997). Thus, this result threw this assumption into question. In addition, it is results such as this that form most of the debate around transracial adoption, and the issue of racial identity in transracially adopted children.



Phinney (1996) offers a definition of racial or ethnic identity, suggesting that ethnic identity may be conceptualised as “a fundamental aspect of the self that is associated with an individual’s sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group and includes an individual’s thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviours associated with ethnic group membership” (cited in Spencer, Icard, Harachi and Oxford, 2000, p. 365). Ethnic identity is therefore considered a fundamental aspect of one’s overall personal identity. People who are against transracial adoption argue that if transracially adopted children are unable to develop solid racial identities, then their overall identity may be affected. People who are in favour of transracial adoption argue that research suggests that transracially adopted children have good levels of self esteem and other measures of adjustment, and thus it is questionable whether a solid racial identity is necessary for a positive identity in other domains (Hayes, 1993).

The National Association for Black Social Workers (NASBW) in the United States of America has strongly expressed its opposition to transracial adoption (Alexander & Curtis, 1996). The reason for this appears to be three-fold. Firstly, members of the NASBW have argued that transracial adoption may be likened to “cultural genocide” (Adamec & Pierre, 1991; Bartholet, 1993, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996). Thus, on a societal level they argue that by allowing black children to be reared by white parents, transracial adoption serves to dissipate black culture. Hayes (1993) is critical of this point, and argues that “this is a collectivist argument, it places the rights and interest of the group above the rights of the individual. As such it is an argument that is open to ethical criticism” (p. 309). Secondly, the NASBW has argued that in the United States of America, the transracial adoption of black children is unnecessary as there are black families who are able to adopt black children (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1992, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996). Thus, the NASBW suggests that biased adoption processes have overlooked the potential of black adoptive parents who are capable of adopting black children. Lastly, it has been suggested that black children adopted by white families are at risk for being psychologically damaged (Hermans, 1993, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996). Adding support to the argument against transracial adoption, Soon Huh and Reid (2000, p. 75) suggest that “...a strong argument against intercountry, transracial adoptions concerns the development of a child’s ethnic identity. If children are uprooted from their own culture, their sense of ethnic identity may

become confused or conflicted". Here we can see what may be the second assumption regarding the racial identities of transracially adopted children. That is, that an identity that is not coherent and that lacks integration is necessarily problematic.

In addition to these concerns, Bradley and Hawkins-Leon (2002) have raised their concern that most white parents cannot adequately prepare their black children for the racism that black people in America face. In this regard, Vonk (2001) suggests that parents of transracially adopted children need to equip their children with 'survival skills' that will enable them to cope with racism. Practically, Vonk (2001, p. 254) suggests that this may involve such things as: "learning how to talk about race and racism openly and honestly within the family, staying in touch with other families who are faced with similar issues, practicing responses to insensitive comments from others and demonstrating a lack of tolerance for any racially or ethnically biased comments". The process of equipping black children with these coping skills has been termed racial socialisation (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002). Unlike black children who grow up in black homes, racial socialisation for transracially adopted children will not happen easily and automatically and will require the parents of these children to consciously and actively socialise their children (Vonc, 2001). Bradley and Hawkins-Leon are not optimistic about the potential of white parents to do this, and argue that "the socialization process for African American children has been documented as being different from that of white American children" (ibid, p. 434). They go on to argue that because of this, white parents may not be able to equip their black adopted children with the coping skills needed to deal with the racism that they will encounter. Thus, there is debate in the literature as to whether or not parents of transracially adopted children have the ability to adequately socialize their adopted children, and in turn, whether or not these children will be able to develop a positive racial identity, something which appears necessary in order to cope with the racism that they might encounter. Significantly, Miller (1999) argues that the process of racial socialisation and the building of a racial identity within minority groups act as protective factors, enabling these children to cope with the racism that they confront.

Many people opposed to transracial adoption worry that children who are transracially adopted will not develop a positive racial identity and it has been assumed that children with a negative

racial identity will be more likely to identify with images and dolls characteristic of their adoptive race, than with images and dolls characteristic of their birth race (Bagley, 1993). At first glance, research does not support these assumptions. Research shows that many children who are brought up by parents of the same race as themselves display ambivalence towards their ethnic identity (Bagley, 1993). Empirical evidence of this has also been demonstrated by the use of projective tests, where black children reared by black parents have tended to identify with a white ethnic identity instead of their own. Although some transracially adopted children do identify with a white racial identity, thereby implicitly rejecting their own identity, there is no significant difference in this regard between these children, and children reared in families of their own race. Thus, transracially adopted children show the same low level of ambivalence towards their ethnic identity as those children who are reared by parents of their own race (Johnson et. al., 1987, in Bagley, 1993).

Hayes (1993) argues that research into racial identity has historically been fairly inadequate. He suggests that “research efforts to measure identity and heritage often appear naïve. They may be based on the perceptions of Caucasian parents or on simple tests that do not get at the richness and complexity of a sense of identity or knowledge of heritage” (1993, p. 305). Rushton and Minnis (1997) support this argument, suggesting that racial identity in transracially adopted children has been measured in many different ways, each of which has been problematic. For example, racial identity has been measured by speaking with the parents, and not with the children, which only provides a second-hand account of racial identity. In addition, they suggest that “those studies in which children were interviewed by researchers have been criticised for being too empiricist because children and adolescents may not admit to problems in such a relatively short interview” (Kirton, 1995 cited in Rushton & Minnis, 1997, p. 153).

Thus, the debate around the issue of racial identity in transracially adopted children is huge. Significantly, the debate has focussed on whether or not parents of transracially adopted children are able to socialise their children in such a way that they may develop racial identities reflective of the racial identities of their birth culture. This is based on the assumption that a positive and solid racial identity is necessary in order to cope with racism, and in order to have a positive sense of self generally (Hayes, 1993). Generally, research on the capacity of white parents to

foster coping skills for racism in their transracially adopted children is minimal (Rushton & Minnis, 1997) and the relationship between racial identity and overall identity is not yet certain. In addition, Hollingsworth suggests that “given the perceived close relationship between self-esteem and racial and ethnic identity...it seems safe to assume that transracial or transethnic adoption would simultaneously interfere with the development of self-esteem in adoptees” (1997, p. 107). However, research has not yet displayed this, and it seems that transracially adopted children are able to develop a good self esteem, whilst simultaneously having a very weak racial identity (Bagley, 1993; Rushton & Minnis, 1997). The question then arises, is it really necessary for these children to have a strong racial identity characteristic of the racial identity of their birth culture, or is a weak racial identity a problem? Having conducted a review of the research on transracial adoption, Rushton and Minnis concluded that “the research does not...allow firm conclusions on the issue of racial identity” (1997, p. 153).

### **2.10.3. The importance of the family approach to the transracially adopted child**

Although much research has downplayed the importance of a positive racial identity in transracially adopted children, Feigelman and Silverman (1983), found that “adoptees that showed more pride in their own background were better adjusted than those who were less enthusiastic about their cultures of origin” (cited in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000, p. 76). This particular research did not point to factors that would affect an adoptee’s pride in their own background. However, the literature does imply that children are affected by the attitude of their families and that families who accept and value the difference between themselves and their child are more likely to foster a positive racial identity, than families who do not. Specifically, the literature suggests that parents and families who adopt children of a different race may respond to their children in two qualitatively different ways. On the one hand, parents of transracially adopted children may embrace their child’s race and culture of birth. Such families may openly discuss the differences between themselves and their child and may consciously educate their child about their culture of birth. Such families tend to live in heterogeneous communities and may have friends and associates of the same race as that of their child. Cole (1992 in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000) found that these family qualities were important factors in the development of positive racial identities in transracially adopted children. On the other hand,

some families of transracially adopted children seem concerned that emphasising the differences between themselves and their children will alienate them from their adoptive children. These families respond to the issue of transracial adoption by minimising the differences between themselves and their child. Liow does not support this approach, arguing that “what children think of themselves as they grow up is crucial and their race is one of the basic ingredients of their self-concepts. In fact, there is reason to think that coping mechanisms built on denial of racial differences may be maladaptive in childhood and contribute to marginalization as adulthood approaches” (1994, p. 379). Research in both Britain and the United States of America supports this and suggests that transracial adoption is more successful when the parents of transracially adopted children consciously expose their children to their culture of birth (Tizard, 1977; Ladner, 1997, in Bagley, 1993). Ladner (1997, in Bagley, 1993, p. 286) argues that “although it is essential that parents love and care for their children, they should also hold in esteem and interact with black culture if they are to fully meet their black child’s identity needs”. Thus, it has been argued that “the psychosocial adjustment of adopted children is maximised when parents acknowledge their child’s physical differences but emphasize their psychological similarities” (Friedlander, Larney, Skau, Hotaling, Cutting & Schwam, 2000, p. 196). This is relevant to all families with adopted children, but would seem particularly relevant to families with children who have been transracially adopted, where the physical differences between parent and child are more pronounced. In addition, Friedlander et. al. (2000) found that many of the parents in the study had framed the entire family as a multicultural family, and had engaged with their adopted child’s birth culture as a family. They felt that this was important, and argued that “construing the family as a whole multiculturally (e.g. “We are a Brazilian American family”)... serves to reduce the children’s sense of isolation and differentness” (p. 196).

Vonk (2001) has suggested several ways in which parents of transracially adopted children may become ‘culturally competent’ and in so doing, enhance their adopted child’s racial identity. At this stage, it must be noted that this concept of cultural competence has not been empirically tested and therefore remains at the level of speculation. Nevertheless, Vonk (2001) proposes some useful guidelines for increasing and enhancing the racial identities of transracially adopted children. These guidelines may be relevant for both parents of such children, and professionals (such as teachers and psychologists) working with such children. Vonk (2001) refers to the first

element of cultural competence as 'multicultural planning'. Here Vonk (2001) refers to the ways in which parents need to expose their transracially adopted children to their culture of birth, including such practical things as sending their children to racially represented schools; living in diverse neighbourhoods where their child's race is represented; and exposing their transracially adopted children to race-appropriate role models. Vonk expresses her hope that through such exposure, transracially adopted children "may develop a unique racial and cultural identity that is based on some combination of the races and cultures of family members and the culture of their own race" (2001, p. 254). An identity based on two cultures is referred to in the literature as a biracial identity or bicultural identification (Friedlander et. al., 2000). Although not much is known about bicultural identification (Kerwin et. al., 1993 in Friedlander et. al., 2000) research suggests that the development of a biracial identity is possible provided that children are exposed to both cultures.

The second component of cultural competence is 'racial awareness'. By this Vonk (2001) means that parents need to be aware of the ways in which variables such as culture, race and language operate in society and how issues of power relating to these variables may affect themselves and their children. Practically, Vonk (2001) suggests that self-awareness on the part of adopted parents is an important aspect of racial awareness. In America and Britain, many adoptive parents of transracially adopted children belong to a majority culture and may tend to underplay the importance of race in their own lives. De Haymes (2003, p. 258) conducted research into transracial adoption in which she found that "some children... indicated that their white parents didn't always recognise racism in schools or in some other experiences. They added that their parents sometimes avoided discussions of race or often tried to minimise their experiences of racism, rather than seeing it through the child's eyes". Thus, white parents of black adopted children need to sensitise themselves to issues of race and racism. The importance of self-awareness on the part of adoptive parents is highlighted by Baden and Steward (in Bradley and Hawkins-Leon, 2001) who argue that:

White American parents may attempt to approach the process of adoption from a 'second choice' or 'colour blind' perspective, they may consciously or unconsciously have the attitude of either "white superiority" or pity for African Americans. Consequently, this

particular attitude may convey to the transracial adoptee a disrespect or dislike for African Americans, which may cause identity confusion or self-hate that is difficult to resolve. (p. 439)

Thus parents need to not only be sensitive to how racism plays out in society generally, but to their own stereotypes and prejudices that may affect their transracially adopted child.

Despite potential problems with the formation of racial identity, there is much empirical support for transracial adoption. However, research does suggest that transracially adopted children do better when they are able to develop positive racial identities and that adoptive parents may have an important role to play in assisting their children with this task.

### **2.11. Adoption and attachment**

In addition to the unique challenges that transracially adopted children have to face, they also confront similar challenges to those faced by adopted children generally. The literature on adoption seems to indicate that in general, adopted children face more socioemotional problems than children who are not adopted and may be more psychologically vulnerable (Singer, Brodzinsky, Steir and Waters, 1985). Wierzbicki (1993 in Juffer & Rosenboom, 1997, p. 94) concludes that this increased vulnerability may be seen in research showing that “(1) adoptees are over-represented in clinical populations; (2) adopted adolescents have more externalising problems than nonadoptees; and (3) adopted children have more academic problems than nonadopted children”. In trying to understand why this is the case, many researchers have examined the issue of attachment in children who are adopted. In particular, researchers have been interested in assessing whether or not adopted children are able to attach to their adopted mothers in the same way that children are able to attach to their birth mothers. This interest in attachment is based on the assumption that long-term social and emotional adjustment is to a large extent contingent on adequate attachment during infancy and early childhood (Singer et. al., 1985).

Attachment in adopted children seems to be a complicated process where the histories of the adoptive parents as well as the histories of the adoptive children meet and impact on one another. Research has highlighted several key issues in this regard. Research has consistently shown that the age of the child at adoption is a key factor in predicting whether or not children will develop secure attachments with their adoptive parents (Howe, 2001; Juffer & Rosenboom, 1997; Singer et. al., 1985). The consensus seems to be that children adopted before the age of 6 months are much more likely to develop secure attachments with adoptive mothers than children who are adopted at a later age. In fact, Juffer and Rosenbloom's (1997) research indicated that under the age of six months, the age of the child does not seem to affect attachment. In these cases, children seem to be able to re-attach to their adoptive mothers and mothers seem to be able to compensate for any early deprivation experienced by the child (Juffer & Rosenboom, 1997). Thus, Juffer and Rosenboom conclude that "adoption placement *per se*, without the cumulative effects of understimulation and lack of personal affection that older placed children often experience in institutions, does not inevitably lead to a disturbed parent-infant relationship" (1997, p. 93). Howe (2001) conducted research into the types of relationships that adult adopted children who had been reunited with their birth mothers experienced with both their adopted mothers and their birth mothers. He found that those adults who were adopted at a young age were more likely to keep in contact with both birth and adopted mothers, whilst those adults who were adopted at an older age were more likely to have lost contact with both their adopted and their birth mothers. Howe concluded that "an early placement appears to promote a secure attachment to the adoptive mother, providing a secure base from which to explore relationships, including that with the birth mother" (2001, p. 232).

Singer et. al. (1985) suggest that the transracially adopted children appeared to have greater difficulty establishing secure attachments with their birth mothers than children who had been adopted inracially. They speculated that the most likely cause of this was that mothers with children of a different race to themselves experienced more anxiety and went through a longer period of adjustment than mothers of adopted children who displayed a greater physical resemblance to themselves. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, new parents of transracially adopted infants may have lacked confidence about their ability to raise a child of a different race to themselves. This lack in confidence may result in greater anxiety with their



child, extending the period of attachment with their infant. Secondly, it was speculated that parents of transracially adopted children may experience less social support than other parents, and that this may have an impact on attachment. Thus, they argue that “decreased support would then be expected to undermine the parent-child socioemotional relationship” (Singer et. al., 1985, p. 1549). Singer et. al. (1985) suggested that this is a period of adjustment that does eventually normalise, reasoning that the research on the adjustment of older transracially adopted children suggests that these children are as well adjusted as inracially adopted children. It has already been suggested that later adjustment appears to be contingent on adequate bonding in infancy, thus Singer et. al. (1985) assumed that these transracially adopted children eventually shifted from being insecurely attached, to being securely attached, to their adopted mothers. Juffer and Rosenbloom (1997) did not find that transracially adopted children developed insecure attachments more often than inracially adopted children. They concluded that the age of the children in their study was younger, and that age at adoption might explain the insecure attachment developed in the transracially adopted children in the Singer et. al. (1985) study. Thus, it seems that the age of the child at adoption is more significant than the race of the child.

Some research has shown that adopted children who are adopted into homes where there are biological children of the adoptive parents tend to experience more social, emotional and behavioural problems than adopted children in families where there are no biological children (Juffer & Rosenbloom, 1997). Juffer and Rosenbloom’s (1997) research was not conclusive and they suggest that a longitudinal research design would be necessary in order to understand the origins of these problematic experiences of adopted children in homes where there are biological children. However, Juffer and Rosenbloom (1997) did argue that attachment might be implicated in this phenomena, suggesting that sensitivity to their adopted child’s needs may differ depending on whether or not the adoptive mother has biological children. In this regard they argue that “in attachment theory, the parent’s sensitivity is considered a key determinant of attachment security... we found that adoptive mothers with biological children are less sensitive than adoptive mothers without biological children” (p. 105).

## **2.12. Factors that affect the adjustment of adopted children**

It has already been argued that early, pre-adoption experiences of abuse or neglect may affect the manner in which a child attaches to its adopted mother. Since early attachment is an important predictor of later adjustment, these pre-adoption experiences are significant mediators of the adoptive experience. It has also been shown that this mediating factor is the same for all children, regardless of whether they are adopted transracially or inracially.

Another factor that can affect the adjustment of adopted children later in life is the timing and the way in which they discover that they are adopted. Liow (1994) argues that “early discovery, when the child is told too soon, can result in feelings of rejection and desertion; conversely, late discovery can result in identity confusion and feelings of betrayal when an adolescent finds out about the adoption by accident or from reticent parents. The method and timing of telling seems crucial for all children” (p. 377). The socially visible nature of transracial adoption suggests that most transracially adopted children will not have to endure the trauma of discovering their adoptive status too late. Friedlander et. al. (2000) argue that “knowledge of the adoption cannot be kept from the very young child or remain a private family matter when physiognomic differences regularly prompt questions and comments from strangers” (p. 187). Liow suggests that this could be a strength attached to transracial adoption as transracially adopted children “could get a head start with identity development if information about heritage is matched to the child’s level of understanding” (p. 378).

## **2.13. A critique of research on transracial adoption**

Although much has been learnt from research conducted on the issue of transracial adoption, there are several criticisms of this research, especially when it is applied to the South African context. Firstly, although there has been much research in the area of transracial adoption, it has largely been conducted in Britain and America. These countries are contextually very different to South Africa, and lack some of the issues that may potentially affect the transracial adoption experiences of South African children, for example, that of language. Feigelman (2000) suggests that a central concern for transracially adopted children is that these children may become

marginalized both in their culture of birth and in their adoptive culture – in other words, they might never really fit in anywhere. In this regard, Feigelman (2000, p. 166) argues that “one controversial question is whether the transracial adoptee becomes marginalized in the majority society (where they may be regarded as an outsider because of their physical distinctiveness) and also within the minority community (where they may also become estranged, because of their Anglo/Caucasian adoptive parentage)”. In South Africa, where transracially adopted black children could have difficulty communicating with other black people if the language of their birth family is not learnt, marginalization from their birth culture may be even more pronounced. It is not possible to know how language issues affect transracially adopted children in South Africa, as research has not been conducted in this regard. However, it is worth considering that findings from American and Britain research cannot simply be directly transferred to the South African context.

Secondly, much of the research that has been conducted on transracial adoption has been done with the adoptive parents and not the children (Hollingsworth, 1997). Parents have been the spokesmen for their children and a lot of the knowledge that has been generated has been based on the parents’ perceptions of their children. One of the possible reasons for this is that the children were too young at the time of the studies to be interviewed (Hollingsworth, 1997). This highlights the need to study children directly. The strength of this particular study therefore lies in the fact that the research will be conducted with the children themselves.

Thirdly, Frasc and Brooks (2003) suggest that transracial adoption research has generally focussed too narrowly on either the parents of the transracially adopted children or the transracial adoptees themselves. They suggest that a more suitable unit of analysis would be the family unit as they argue that “over time, the dynamic interplay between the needs and negotiations of the individual family members and of the family as a whole certainly influences the transracial adoptees psychosocial development and ‘fit’ with the family and community” (p. 201).

Willis (1996 in Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002) argues that the methods used in these studies are not reliable and thus any results gained from these studies have severe limitations. For example, Bradley and Hawkins-Leon (2002) suggest that “the Clark Doll Test, a projective measure used in several of the longitudinal studies, has been severely criticised as being invalid

if used to evaluate anything more than a child's preference for a doll in a contrived, forced situation" (p. 435). Thus, they argue that some of the traditional means of assessing racial identity in these studies on transracial adoption may not be adequate and therefore the findings should not be interpreted too liberally. In addition, it has also been argued that the adjustment of black, transracially adopted children has largely been compared to the adjustment of white, inracially-adopted children. Thus, a white cultural experience has been used as the standard of comparison for black children, a fact that some researchers find problematic (Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002).

Another criticism of research on transracial adoption is that the sample sizes are generally fairly small (Park & Green, 2000 in Burrow & Finley, 2003). Finley (1999 in Burrow & Finely, 2003) suggests that this is due to the relatively low incidence of adoption in the population, and that it is a common problem with research into adoption generally, and not only transracial adoption specifically.

Taylor and Thornton (1996 in Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002, p.436) argue that some research findings on adjustment in transracially adopted children have downplayed the importance of racial identity in these children. Significantly, where research has shown that transracially adopted children do not have well developed racial identities, researchers have tended to minimise the importance of these findings. Specifically, they suggest that:

In the studies that reported the "successful adjustment" of transracial adoptees, researchers omitted or minimised other important outcomes in their analyses such as (a) the presence of racial identity and awareness issues among transracial adoptees (e.g., McCroy & Zurcher, 1983; Shireman & Johnson, 1986); (b) the large number of transracial adoptive families who resided in predominantly white American neighbourhoods (e.g., Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Simon & Alstein, 1992); (c) the general belief of white American parents that race would not be a major issue for their transracially adopted children in the future (e.g. McCroy & Zurcher, 1983); and (d) the discovery of emotional maladjustment among some African American adoptees (e.g. Silverman & Feigelman, 1981).

Lastly, Frasch and Brooks (2003) suggest that research on transracial adoption has not been sufficiently rooted in theory (for example, theories of racial identity development) and that this may explain why there have been inconsistencies in the research findings in the area of transracial adoption. They argue that this is particularly relevant with regards to “the role of racial identity development in the development and well-being of transracially adopted children” (ibid, p.201)

#### **2.14. Summary**

The phenomenon of transracial adoption in South Africa is one that is particularly under-researched. Although much research has been conducted in countries such as Britain and America, these countries have very different contextual issues to those faced in South Africa. Thus any application of this research to the South African context needs to be done with caution. In addition, little research internationally has been conducted by speaking directly with transracially adopted children. Data has mostly been gathered from parents and there is therefore a need to gain an understanding of the experience of transracial adoption from the perspective of the children themselves.

A review of the existing literature on transracial adoption shows that much research has focussed on the adjustment of these children. Results are generally positive, suggesting that transracially adopted children are able to adjust well. Despite this, many assume that the task of identity development is more difficult for transracially adopted children as they have the complex task of assimilating several identity related issues, including, race and adoption. In addition, there is much debate in the literature regarding the racial identities of these children and there is concern that they may develop confused racial identities and will not have the coping mechanisms needed to survive in what is assumed to be a racist society. This research is based on more traditional theories of identity, which assume that a positive identity is one that is coherent and free of conflict. It also assumes a certain level of integration, meaning that a person should experience themselves relatively similarly across time and place.

Relatively absent in these theories of identity is the impact of other people and culture on the development of individual identity. Identity development in these theories argues that individuals progress through universally predictable stages, with a more or less similar outcome at the end. More recent research on identity challenges these assumptions. Specifically, a dialogical understanding of the self assumes that people fundamentally develop within relationships, and that these systems of relationships, including cultural systems, impact on the individual's developing identity. As far as these relationships impact on the identity of the individual, they are referred to as external positions within the self. Acknowledging the importance of relationships seems to account for the research findings which argue that the parents' response to their transracially adopted child is an important factor in mediating the child's racial identity.

A dialogical understanding of the self also challenges the assumption that a positive identity necessarily has to be integrated and coherent and makes space for identities that are characterised by conflict and confusion. Thus, subjectively experienced identities, or internal positions within the self, may be experienced as conflicting with one another without being defined as problematic. It was therefore felt that this theory had the capacity to capture the complex nature of identity development in transracially adopted children. As such, it could facilitate a depth of understanding of these identities not facilitated by more traditional theories of identity. In addition, the theory of the dialogical self had the capacity to meet the three main objectives that arise out of this research, including (a) to describe the internal and external positions occupied by each participant; (b) to understand the influence of systems of relationships on the identities of the participants, and (c) to determine whether or not there are common trends in positions occupied by the participants.

## **Chapter three**

### **Methodology**

#### **3.1. Rationale**

There is a marked absence of South African research in the transracial adoption literature and yet there is a need to better understand and therefore better facilitate positive transracial adoption experiences. This study aims to speak directly with South African transracially adopted adolescents in order to understand their experiences of transracial adoption.

Traditionally, research into the identities of transracially adopted children has relied on constructs that may be operationalised such as self-esteem. More recent research into identity suggests that this approach is too reductionist and that it may limit the capacity to gather a rich understanding of the kinds of identity issues that transracially adopted children face. In this light, this study aims to use a narrative approach to identity and in particular the theory of the dialogical self, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the identities, including racial and adoptive identities, of transracially adopted children in South Africa. By outlining and describing the multiple and contrasting identities of the transracially adopted children in this sample and by grounding this research in a theory of the self, theory-based explanations for the findings may be obtained.

Research on transracial adoption has typically focussed on individuals within families and not relationships between family members. Whilst this research study will not specifically examine the family unit, perspectives of both the children and the parents will be gained. It is assumed that this will facilitate a rich account of the transracial adoptees in their family context and will enable some speculation on the kinds of interpersonal dynamics present in the families involved.

Lastly, understanding the kinds of identity issues which these children face individually should enable comparison between the individuals. Identifying similar identity related issues across the participants may enable a more general understanding of the kinds of identity issues experienced by transracially adopted children in South Africa. In order to promote more positive adoption

experiences, it is hoped that this understanding will facilitate a discussion on recommendations for parents of transracially adopted children as well as professionals working with transracially adopted children.

### **3.2. Aim**

This study aims to provide a rich description of the multiple and contrasting identities of transracially adopted children in South Africa

### **3.3. Research questions**

This study will address the following questions:

1. What is the collection of internal and external positions that each transracially adopted child occupies, especially in relation to the identity relevant domains of adoption and race?
2. How do the systems of relationships in which the child operates affect his or her identity?
3. Is there a commonality of positions that these children occupy?

### **3.4. Research design**

The research design for this study was based on principles of qualitative design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study was both descriptive and interpretive in nature. The sample was small so that rich data was obtained from each participant. Narratives of the participants were obtained through interviews.

There were two reasons for the decision to employ a qualitative research design. Firstly, the nature of the research question meant that the interest was interested in gaining a descriptive picture of the identities of the adolescents who had been transracially adopted. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.2) argue that “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. By adopting a qualitative approach to the research question, it was possible to obtain a



richness of data that would not have been possible using psychometric tools and engage in relatively exploratory research. The literature on transracial adoption in South Africa is very limited, and not much knowledge has been generated on the racial identities of these children in South Africa. Neuman (1997, p. 19) argues that “exploratory researchers frequently use qualitative data. The techniques for gathering qualitative data are less wedded to a specific theory or research question. Qualitative researchers tend to be more open to using a range of evidence and discovering new issues”. Lastly, this research project was based on the assumption that human behaviour is dynamic and is therefore not reducible to a few generalisable rules. For this reason, there was a need to find a way of capturing the dynamic and complex nature of human behaviour and experience, which a qualitative approach facilitated (Brockmeier & Harré, 1997).

### **3.5. Sample**

The sampling method that was used for this research is broadly known as non-probability sampling, as it does not rely on any mechanisms of randomness (Neuman, 1997). More specifically, the method of *purposive sampling* was used in order to obtain the sample for this research project. Neuman suggests that purposive sampling is appropriate “when a researcher wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation (where) the purpose is less to generalise to a larger population than it is to gain a deeper understanding of types” (1997, p. 206). More specifically, the sampling method was criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is defined as sampling for “all cases that meet some criterion” (p.29). There were three sampling criteria that were used in finding appropriate participants for this study. In some cases the sampling criterion had to be relaxed due to the small number of transracially adopted adolescents available for inclusion in the study.

The first sampling criterion was that the participants be in their early to late teens, between the ages of 13 and 19 as research suggests that adolescence is the developmental period when identity formation primarily occurs. In addition, older children should have reached what Piaget termed the Formal Operational stage of development, which means that they have the ability to think in more abstract terms, and should have been better able to reflect upon their experiences

(Bukatko & Daehler, 1995). It was assumed that this, in conjunction with a greater level of maturity, would result in a depth of information that may have been difficult to obtain from very young children.

The second sampling criterion was that participants had been transracially adopted. Transracial adoption is defined as the adoption of a child by parents who are from a dissimilar race. This sampling criterion was not used entirely strictly. One of the participants was never officially adopted by his adoptive family, although he had been living with them as if adopted since he was first born. Thus, his experience of growing up had been one consistent with transracial adoption, which was felt by the researcher to be acceptable for inclusion in the research.

The third sampling criterion concerned the age of the participants. Silverman and Fiegleman (1981, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996) researched the adjustment of African American children adopted by white families using a control group of white children adopted by white families. They found that black children tended to be older at the time of adoption than white children, and that black children displayed more maladjustment than white children. As a result of these findings “the researchers concluded that the age of the child at adoption had more of an impact on adjustment than transracial adoption” (Silverman & Fiegleman, 1981 in Alexander & Curtis, 1996, p. 227). Children who are adopted at an older age are more likely to experience negative life events such as various forms of abuse, than children who are adopted at a younger age. For this reason, the third sampling criterion was that the children were adopted before the age of 15 months. This age criterion provided enough time for the child to be placed in a family after birth, but reduces the chances of the child being affected by negative life events, which could influence their psychosocial adjustment, thereby obscuring the effect of transracial adoption on overall adjustment. This age criterion proved difficult to adhere to in a strict manner. Owing to apartheid laws that existed when they were infants, two of the participants had been adopted at a much later age, once laws had changed to make transracial adoption in South Africa legal. Thus, although they were older at the time of adoption, they had been living with their adoptive families from an early age. A third participant had also been living with his adoptive family since a very young age, although this was an informal arrangement and he was partially cared for by his birth grandmother.

The sample was small, containing four participants, two female and two male. A small sample was appropriate for this research as the aim of the research was to obtain rich, in-depth information from each participant. As a result, time spent with each participant was intense and extended, and a large sample would have gone beyond the constraints of this research.

In addition to the sample of transracially adopted children, there was also a sample of the parents of the transracially adopted children. This sample was obtained through convenience sampling. Ideally both parents of the children were interviewed, but where this was not possible, either parent of the child who was available was interviewed. Ultimately, out of the four children involved in the research, both parents were interviewed in two of the families, and in two of the families only one parent was interviewed. Thus, six parents were interviewed altogether.

### **3.6. Research procedure**

#### **3.6.1. Contacting and contracting with the families**

I was fortunate to have access to a transracial adoption support group who had compiled a list of families who had adopted transracially. This list contained names and contact details and formal permission was not needed in order to gain access to this list. Initially the participants were contacted by telephone. During this initial contact, a brief description of the research was provided, and a request for a face-to-face meeting was made. Each family was then met with individually, and the children and parents were consulted simultaneously. The main aim of this meeting was to ensure that all participants, including the children and their parents, were consulted in order to inform them of the details of the study, and the ethical issues involved with participation in the study. Information was provided in both a verbal and a written form. There were two information sheets, one for the children and one for the parents (information sheets attached in Appendix A). Both information sheets were written in simple terms and the information sheet for the children was written in child friendly language. The information provided to the participants included the purpose of the research, the availability of the research results, as well as all ethical issues, including such issues as confidentiality, whether or not incentives would be given and the costs and benefits of the research process.

In order to ensure that the participants understood all the implications involved in participation in the research, I went through the information sheet thoroughly, allowing time for any questions that arose. Many of the participants were initially inclined to give the information sheet a cursory glance. This made it important to go through the sheet verbally in order to ensure that all the participants gained access to the information that they required in order to make an informed decision with regards to their participation in the research. I also ensured that the participants had time to reflect on what they learnt about the study. Although all the participants agreed to participate in the research immediately, I asked them to consider their decision, and I contacted them a few days later to confirm that they were comfortable with participating in the research. This enabled them to make an informed and unrushed decision before committing to participate in the study. Once they agreed to participate, all participants signed an informed consent form (informed consent forms attached under Appendix B).

As my sample contained minors, special consideration with regards to consent was warranted. It was made clear to all the families that if the parents did not give their permission, the family would not be interviewed. In addition, it was made clear that if parents did give their permission, but their children did not want to participate in the research, then the family would not be involved in the research. This was explained verbally, included in the information sheet and in the informed consent sheet. This did not happen, and all the members of the four families participated eagerly and willingly in the research process. I explained to the participants simply and clearly that they were able to withdraw at any stage. The age of the participants was such that their cognitive development should have enabled them to understand this in a reasonable manner. However, because of their age, the children may have lacked the confidence to assert their right to discontinue their participation in the research should they have wished to. In this way they may have been disempowered by virtue of their age. I spoke explicitly on this issue in order to maximise the likelihood of the participants feeling confident enough to withdraw from the research should they have wanted to. Both the children and the parents participated in this research positively and engagingly.

### **3.6.2. Data collection techniques**

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996). It was assumed that some structured questions combined with more open-ended questions in the interview would allow for the discussion to flow, and for issues to arise freely, whilst at the same time giving the interview structure and direction. Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest that a less directive, more flexible approach to interviewing creates a context that allows for genuine dialogue and exploration through narrative, as opposed to stilted questions and responses.

Robson (1993, p.229) argues that “face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying one’s line of enquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating motives in a way that postal and other self-administered questionnaires cannot. Non-verbal cues may give messages which help in understanding the verbal response, possibly changing or even, in extreme cases, reversing its meaning”. This face-to-face contact with the participants seemed invaluable, and gave rise to responses that would not have been obtained in any other way. In many instances, the verbal communication of the participants was in direct contrast to their non-verbal communication. This witnessing of their non-verbal communication offered an opportunity to explore levels of experience that would have been lost to the researcher, had the researcher used a means of data collection that did not involve interpersonal contact.

The interview process was a three-stage process (Schuman, 1982, in Seidman, 1991). Since the participants were required to be open, honest and reflect on their sense of themselves, a three-stage process offered three potential benefits. Firstly, meeting on three occasions enabled better rapport to be established between the participants and the researcher. It seemed that the participants did respond openly and honestly to the researcher partly as a result of this process. During the first interview the majority of the participants were fairly shy and reserved and I believe that had I asked about their adoption in the first interview, the level of their defensiveness around this issue would have increased. Secondly, it was assumed that having time between meetings would enable the participants to think about the content of the interviews and to develop their responses in the next interview. Although there was one instance where a participant appeared to have reflected on the content of the previous interview, the participants

generally did not verbalize that they had spent time between interviews contemplating what was said. The reason for this is uncertain. It will be seen in the results section that the participants displayed a fairly high level of guardedness around the issue of their adoption. This phenomenon of not thinking about the interviews once they were finished may therefore be consistent with this defensive picture. However, research suggests that adolescents engage with their identity most vigorously between the ages of 18 and 22 (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001). Thus, it is possible that this absence of engagement could simply be explained by the age of the participants.

The focus of the discussion was different for each interview. The aim of the first interview was to establish rapport with the participant and thus the questions were designed to be non-threatening and easy for the children to answer. The focus of the first interview was therefore on getting to know the participant and some of the contexts that they move in, such as school, friends, and extra-mural activities. The second interview focussed on the participants' thoughts about and experiences of being adopted. The decision was taken to speak about adoption generally, and not the issue of race specifically, in order to allow the participants' experiences of negotiating their racial identity to arise spontaneously. It was assumed that the issue of race would be different for each child, and that whether or not the participants discussed themselves in relation to race would be significant and interpretable. Although the decision was made not to ask about race specifically, during the course of the interview process the researcher referred to one of the participant's experience of herself as a white girl in a "black girl's body". This was an unplanned question, but was used to compare and contrast the participant's experience of themselves in terms of race, and was done when the participants did not spontaneously offer an account of their subjective experience of race. The last interview focussed on the issue of identity and whether or not the children experienced themselves as similar or different across different contexts. Although this was based on the theory of the dialogical self, which assumes that individuals have numerous positions that are experientially different, this last interview was experienced by the researcher as being relatively unsuccessful. On reflection, some of the questions were too abstract for the participants to readily identify with and understand, and in fact many of the questions in this last interview could be answered simply by looking more closely at the ways in which the participants spoke about themselves in the previous two interviews (the child interview schedule is attached in Appendix C).

Unlike previous research using the voice-centred relational method as a method of analysis (Brown, & Gilligan, 1992; Saville, 2001; Mkhize, 2003), the interview process in this research was not designed in order to elicit one significant story on which to base the analysis. Rather, the three interviews were semi-structured, and the participants were asked many questions during the interview process. This decision to design the interview schedule in a structured manner was based on two assumptions. Firstly, it was assumed that the participants were at an age which might be characterised with relative social awkwardness and discomfort, especially with a person who was older than, and unfamiliar to, them. Thus, it was felt that the participants might be fairly inhibited, especially in the first interview, and that starting with an open-ended question would be experienced as too threatening. A structured interview schedule provided an opportunity to guide the participants through the interviews, and it was hoped that in this way they would be offered a greater sense of security. Secondly, it was assumed that there would be power dynamics operating between the participant and the researcher, placing the participants in a less powerful position where spontaneous and self-reflective dialogue may be constricted. Thus, a more structured interview schedule provided a greater framework for dialogue.

Having time between interviews enabled the researcher to reflect on the interviews, and to probe further around certain areas if necessary. This was experienced by the researcher as beneficial, especially with regards to interviews that were experienced by the researcher as stilted and awkward. Having time to reflect on the interview gave the researcher an opportunity to target certain areas for further discussion and exploration. Thus, it is felt that a three-stage interview process enabled a richness of data that would not have been gathered from a once-off meeting. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

Although the main focus of the research was on the child's experience, the parents of the children were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of the family factors that may have mediated the child's identity. The literature suggests that the family response to the transracial adoption is an important factor in terms of the transracially adopted child feeling positive about his or her racial identity. A single interview was conducted with the parents and was framed by a fairly structured interview schedule. The focus of the interview with the parents was on asking them about their response to raising a child from a different race group to themselves, and the

ways in which they have approached this experience. By doing this, a better contextual picture of the transracially adopted children was gained. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The parent interview schedule is attached in Appendix D.

A pilot case was used in order to assess the suitability of the interview schedule. Due to the difficulty obtaining research participants, the participant who participated in the pilot interviews was not in the age frame for this study. However, he did appear to be engaging with identity related issues, and thus it was decided that it would be appropriate for him to participate in the pilot interviews, but not appropriate to analyse the data obtained from these interviews. No changes were made to the interview schedule as a result of this pilot case.

### **3.6.3. Confidentiality**

It was important to ensure that the information obtained in the interviews was kept confidential with respect to who said what. To ensure that this happened, the names of the participants were not stored with the data and each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym that they would like to use. None of the participants engaged with the idea of creating a pseudonym and verbalized being unconcerned about the use of their data. However, given the small nature of the town in which the research took place and the fact that there are not many transracially adopted children in the town, it was felt that the participants would be easily identifiable. Thus, the researcher chose pseudonyms for each participant. Two of the participants were given isiZulu names, and two of the participants were given English names. There is no conscious reason on the part of the researcher why this is the case, and the allocation of pseudonyms was done fairly randomly. Data will be kept for a maximum of five years, after which time it will be destroyed. The audio tapes of the interviews were destroyed once the thesis was submitted and accepted. The limits to confidentiality were if the participant disclosed that they were suicidal or that they had been sexually abused. These are the same limits to confidentiality that are applied to therapeutic situations. The limits to confidentiality were outlined prior to the interview verbally as well as in the informed consent document (see Appendix B). In this way participants were empowered and were able to understand the consequences of disclosure.



Results have been made available to my supervisor, and, in the form of this thesis, to an internal examiner and an external examiner. It is possible that the results may be written up as a journal article for publication.

A clear and simple written summary of the results was made available to the participants and their families. Once the participants and their families had had an opportunity to read the summary, a feedback meeting was arranged with each family individually, where they had the opportunity to ask questions and respond to the results.

### **3.7. Additional ethical issues: Benefits and risks of research**

The benefits of participating in a research process may be direct or indirect. In this study, material benefits were not offered as it was felt that a financial incentive may have induced some adolescents to participate in the research despite not actually wanting to. My sample was required to speak to me in a frank, honest manner and they were also required to be reflective about their experiences. The research participants may have benefited from the research by talking to someone about their identity issues. In this way they were heard and understood in a context that was non-judgmental. Some of the participants may have experienced this as therapeutic, especially if they had not previously been able to verbalize or express their thoughts and feelings to anybody.

In order to maximise the benefits of this, the child research participants met with the researcher on three occasions. This maximized the chances of rapport being established between the researcher and the participants and enhanced the therapeutic value of the interviews. Additionally, ensuring the availability of psychological care after the research meant that the research process could instigate a period of psychological growth and enhanced adjustment for the research participants.

There were potential psychological risks involved with participation in this research. It was possible that the research interview may have represented the first time the participants had consciously thought about their identity, and the way in which their transracial adoption affects

their lives. Although it was unlikely, some participants may have become upset as a result of such introspection. Safeguards were put in place for the participants. Firstly, nobody was involved against his or her will. Informed consent was obtained, and the participants had the option to withdraw from the research at any stage should they start to feel uncomfortable or distressed. Prior to data collection, I discussed with the participants and their families the best way to access follow up psychological care should the participants draw attention to issues with which they would like ongoing help. Although one of the participants did become emotional during the interview process, this participant did not feel that she wished to stop the interview process or that she wanted any follow up psychological care. In addition, it was evident to the researcher that in this family, the parents of this child provided much emotional support to the child, and the participant preferred to turn to her family for comfort, rather than a professional psychologist. All of the participants reported experiencing the interview process as a positive experience.

Although there were no financial costs involved in participation in the research process participation in the research did involve the cost of time. The participants were required to set aside a fairly significant amount of time in order to be briefed about the research, to sign consent forms, and then to be interviewed. All meetings, including interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants and at the convenience of the participants, in order to reduce any inconvenience to the participants.

### **3.8. Data analysis**

#### **3.8.1. Method of analysis**

Data was analyzed using the voice-centred relational method developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992 in Doucet & Mauthner, n.d.). This method of analysis was appropriate for this research for several reasons. Firstly, this method of data analysis has an ontological assumption that made it an appropriate method of data analysis for this research. That is, the voice-centred relational method is based on the assumption that people live and develop within a context of relationships. Human beings are not viewed in isolation, but embedded in relationships that are meaningful and

that structure their identity. Doucet and Mauthner (n.d., p. 5) argue that “The voice-centred relational method represents an attempt to translate (a) relational ontology into methodology and into concrete methods of data analysis by exploring individual’s narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to the broader social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live”. This method of data analysis was therefore ontologically consistent with the theory of the dialogical self, which is the theory of identity on which this research was based.

The second significant strength of this particular analytic approach was a methodological one. The aim of the research was to offer a rich description of the identities of the transracially adopted adolescents, based on the assumptions of identity consistent with the theory of the dialogical self. This assumption argues that individuals occupy various internal and external self-positions that can be in competition with one another. The voice-centred relational method, which involves reading for the voice of ‘I’, or the subjective ways in which individuals speak, think and feel about themselves. This reading for the voice of ‘I’ facilitated the process of identifying the different positions from which the individuals in the sample operate. Through this process of identification it was possible to meet the aims of the research and to capture a rich description of the identities of the adolescents in this sample.

Thirdly, the voice centred relational method makes specific accommodation for the contexts and systems of relationships within which people live and operate. Having assumed a theoretical position that is critical of theories of identity that do not fully take into account the impact of context on identity, it was important that this theoretical assumption was framed and supported by the method of analysis that was used.

Although the intention was to use a narrative analysis it has already been suggested that the interviews did not seek to elicit one story. Thus, in the accounts provided by the participants, one plot and one set of characters does not exist. A strict application of a narrative analysis was therefore not possible, but was also not considered necessary, and there were many stories told through the interview process. These are reflected in the results section.

An important aspect of the voice-centred relational method is the critical manner in which the researcher has to acknowledge and pay attention to her role in the activity of data collection and analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Brown and Gilligan (1992) highlight the fact that an interview between a researcher and a participant is not an objective phenomenon, but a personal, and sometimes intimate, meeting between two people, both of whom shape and direct the conversation. Thus, the researcher is an active participant in the process, and must therefore be aware and sensitive to the role that her participation in the interview plays in shaping the kind of dialogue that emerges. A reflexive discussion on the researcher's impact on the research process, including the process of data analysis, is included in this chapter.

### **3.8.2. The steps in the process of analysis**

Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest that one should listen to a person's story at least four times, each time attending to a different dynamic, or aspect, of the story. This process of reading the data four times ensures that each time the data is processed with different issues in mind, thus enabling a detailed and rich analysis of the data.

As part of the data analysis stage a worksheet was drawn up for each of the four readings in order to structure the process of capturing the information obtained from the four readings. These worksheets stated and reiterated the aims of the specific reading and listed the various questions that should be considered during the course of each reading. This construction and use of worksheets was used by other researchers who used the voice-centred relational method as a means of analysis (Mkhize, 2003; Saville, 2001) and informed the worksheets in this study (worksheets attached in Appendix E). The worksheets served the purpose of ensuring that each reading of each transcript was done with the same questions in mind, ensuring a thorough processing of the data. However, not all of the questions for each reading were answered in relation to each participant. Where questions were not answered, this was generally because responses to the questions were not evident within the transcripts of the participants. The four readings of the transcripts, coupled with the completion of the worksheets for each participant, represented the first stage of processing the data. The following discussion offers a description of each of the four readings, as well examples from the worksheets.

## Reading 1

The first reading is done in order to get familiar with the story as it is told (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This includes attending to the plot of the story, and the events as they unfold. This reading is important in terms of locating the participant within the context of the story that he or she tells. In addition to attending to the plot, the researcher is also required to attend to his/her own responses to both the participant and the participant's story (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This includes such issues as becoming conscious of the way in which the researcher connects with the participant, and how aspects of the participant's story may resonate with the researcher's own personal experience and how these issues may affect how the researcher writes about the participant (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

This first reading, reading for the structure of the narrative, was experienced as extremely difficult and I struggled to find a way to tell their stories whilst at the same time honour my commitment to confidentiality. Conversely, I experienced difficulty with how to tell their stories accurately. I had obtained the children's stories from two sources, namely the children and their parents, and in many cases the stories as told by these two parties were different. Thus, I became stuck on the question of accuracy, naively failing to see that it was *how* the stories were told that was significant, and there was no need to search for the truth of events, or to get an accurate description of the adoption stories of each child. This level of 'stuckness' was partly due to my inaccurate interpretation of the methodology at this early stage of analysis, and partly I believe as a result of my training as a clinician, and my current work in a hospital setting. This is a setting where one works closely with a team of other professionals, a setting where collateral information becomes an important focus as the accuracy of patient's stories is often doubted but where 'the truth' is important for accurate diagnosis. Ultimately, I became aware that although I had not requested the participants to tell me a single spontaneous and personally significant story on which to base my analysis, the participants told many different stories about themselves and their experience of being transracially adopted throughout the interview process. These stories eventually became the thematic framework on which the analysis was based.

The extracts below provide an example of how I summarised the data in this first reading. All names used are pseudonyms.

#### **Examples from worksheet 1**

**Thabo**

Several stories are told of his encounters with racism. All of them have a similar theme, and all of them seem to be resolved in a similar way. The theme centres on a racist incident which is resolved by Thabo's Dad. In none of the stories does Thabo resolve the conflict himself.

**Paul**

Part of the story of Paul's adoption is the contact that he has with his birth family. This contact was experienced as very uncomfortable: "When I was younger I'd go home and visit but it's easier not to". He could not communicate with them because he could not speak isiZulu.

#### **Reading 2**

The second reading was done in order to attend to the voice of the participant and to understand the subjective position of the participant. Brown and Gilligan describe this reading as one in which the researcher should listen "for the voice of the 'I'" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p.27). They suggest that this reading is essential, as it "brings us into relationship with that person, in part by ensuring that the sound of her voice enters our psyche and in part by discovering how she speaks of herself before we speak of her" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p.27). This reading is done by attending to the participant's way of talking about herself, to the contradictions that may exist and to the ways in which a participant may move between speaking about herself and speaking about others and how others may see her (Doucet & Mauthner, n.d.). It has already been suggested that this was an invaluable stage in the analysis as it fitted so appropriately with the theoretical framework of the thesis and was able to suitably realise the goals of the research. Each expression of self was underlined in pencil on the printed transcription and noted on the worksheet that was created for this second reading. Once the worksheets were completed, these expressions of self were conceptualised in terms of internal and external positions, which have

been discussed in relation to the theory of the dialogical self. Internal positions are those experiences of self that are experienced as residing within the self, whereas external positions refer to those aspects of the environment that are experienced as 'mine'. These self-expressions were then compared across the participants, and internal and external positions that were thematically similar or thematically contrasting were identified. The following extracts provide examples of how I summarised the data in the second reading.

#### **Examples from worksheet 2**

##### **Lerato**

Lerato thinks of herself as an independent woman and does not like being constrained or overprotected by others. Despite *thinking* of herself as an independent woman, she does not *experience* herself as an independent woman, as her parents do not allow her the freedom that she desires. Thus, she is constrained by her environment. Speaks in 'we' terms when referring to her friends, suggesting some sense of belonging, of fitting in with them – some form of common understanding, common ways of behaving and of doing things: "me and my friends click, we're just like one, we love being loud, you know, we love talking, we love chatting, we love being together. We understand each other more than anybody else will understand us". Also uses 'we' and 'our' when referring to black people "we'll scream to each other...it's in our culture". Refers to white people as other: "you guys, you'll go to each other and have a conversation". This othering is spoken about in terms of cultural norms – we do it this way, you do it that way. She makes one reference to 'us', where the 'us' that she is referring to is white people: "cause he's married to um, an Indian, so they also do things differently to us, like the white people do".

##### **Nancy**

Speaks of 'we' when referring to the black girls at school who are foreign and who speak English and not isiZulu. Also speaks of 'we' in reference to her family.

#### **Reading 3**

The third and fourth readings may be tailored to the specific area under investigation (Doucet & Mauthner, n.d.). Thus, in this research project, the third reading was done in order to understand

some of the contextual factors that impact on the participant and how these may affect how she may think, feel and speak about herself. These included such questions as where is the participant at school? What type of school is it and how does this affect how the participant speaks about herself? What kinds of friends does the participant have and how are these friends implicated in the participant's sense of self? What constitutes the participant's immediate family and how may these individuals and the relationships that the participants has with them affect the participant's sense of herself? How do the larger contextual factors impact on the participant? Are there contextual factors specific to South Africa that may affect how the participant thinks and feels about herself? Examples of how I summarized the data at this stage of analysis can be seen below.

#### **Examples from worksheet 3**

##### **Thabo**

Language is a barrier for Thabo in terms of making friends with black people. In explaining why he has mostly white friends, he suggests that his inability to speak isiZulu makes it difficult for him to be understood by black people: "like the black people will be speaking Zulu and I wouldn't understand it then cause the while people, they'd understand, I can speak English and they can also and I can understand them and stuff". This issue with language seems unique to South Africa.

##### **Paul**

It seems that isiZulu is a barrier between him and other black people and that because they can't really communicate properly, the black men at work have not yet had full access to Paul as he really is: "I think that they've got a strong hint of who I really am because I do have fun with them, when I can join in I do join in. I try and make them laugh, they try make me laugh, we all get along very well. So it's not far off, if I could speak Zulu they would be experiencing the same me".

#### **Reading 4**

Lastly, the fourth reading focussed on understanding how the participant's parents and the ways in which they raised their child may have affected the participant's sense of themselves. During



this final reading, the researcher was cognizant of questions such as: is there a discrepancy between the way the child speaks about herself and the way the parents speak about the child? Have the parents protected their child from any of the contextual factors that they may otherwise have experienced (e.g. racism?) Have the parents made decisions about rearing their child (such as where to send them to school) that may have affected their child's identity? The following examples concern the way in which I summarized the data during this last reading.

#### **Examples from worksheet 4**

##### **Nancy**

Mom and Dad have not actively encouraged the development of a black identity. In fact, they have been fairly adamant that she will grow up in the same way as their sons, that she will grow up a little white girl. Thus, they live in a very white neighbourhood and she has been sent to private school, 'interference' from birth family has been discouraged. Mom and participant speak about her racial identity in very similar terms.

##### **Paul**

Racial representation in school was not a factor for making a decision about where to send Paul. Their social circle is mostly white and they have never felt that they should diversify their social circle for the sake of the children. Paul has therefore not had very much contact with black people.

Once the worksheets had been completed, issues that arose within the transcripts for each participant were compared and contrasted with issues that arose between the participants. Through this process of comparison, thematically similar and contrasting stories were identified. The conceptual identification of thematically similar stories, rather than simple themes, was useful and provided an appropriate structure for the results section of the thesis. Conceptualising these thematically similar issues in terms of stories, with collections of characters, was consistent with the relational and narrative ontology on which this thesis was based. Lastly, it can be seen that the worksheets were largely descriptive in nature. Thus, it was only once the worksheets were completed that the findings were conceptualised and interpreted in terms of the theory of the dialogical self, i.e. in terms of a repertoire of internal and external positions. It was also after completion of the worksheets that many of the findings were interpreted in relation to how

certain factors (such as language) may have affected the identity of the participants. Thus, in many instances there is an interpretive leap from the worksheets seen in this section, to the results section that follows.

### **3.9. Methodological Limitations**

#### **3.9.1. The sample**

One of the most significant limitations of this research and the results that arise from it is the size of the sample that was used. There were only four children involved in the research, and although the nature of the data that was collected from them was very rich, the small sample size means that the results of the research cannot be generalized to other transracially adopted children with a great degree of certainty or accuracy. Another limitation is the great degree of variation within the sample. No attempt was made to control the variables in this study as it was considered unnecessary given that the aim of the research was not to establish causal relationships. However, there was a great degree of variety within the sample in terms of their adoptive experiences (including such things as age at adoption, parents' reasons for adopting and pre-adoptive experiences), all of which may have played a role in shaping the identities of the children in this study. Thus, it is not possible to say with a great degree of certainty that there were not other possible explanations for the findings presented here in this research. Suggestions for future research would include replicating the present study with a larger sample, and replicating the present study with a sample that is more homogenous. Taken either together or separately, these two suggestions would enhance the degree to which future findings could be generalized.

Lastly, one transracially adopted adolescent who was contacted refused to participate in the research. It is possible that there is something about the individuals who agreed to participate in the research that differentiates them from people who did not agree to participate in the research. Specifically, it is possible that the experiences that have been captured in this research are more positive than the experiences of individuals who did not agree to participate. Thus, the

transferability of these results to other transracially adopted individuals must be made with caution.

### **3.9.2. The assumptions of the theory of the dialogical self: caution against reification of the results**

Although recommendations for parents and other professionals involved with the care of transracially adopted children have been made, there are several important assumptions that need to be considered in how these recommendations are understood and applied. Firstly, making recommendations implies a relative degree of certainty regarding the commonality of the findings. Thus, it is implied that these children had common experiences that were relatively consistent across time, experiences that might benefit from a relatively common approach or intervention. However, these assumptions are in conflict with the theory of identity upon which this research was based. The central assumption of this theory is that identities are fluid and have the capacity to change, not only across time, but in relation to different contexts and people. Thus, the researcher would like to caution readers of this research not to reify the identities of the children in this sample, nor to adhere to the recommendations on which these identities were based in a strict and inflexible manner. Rather, the reader should be cognizant of the complexity and fluidity of the identities of the children involved in this study and the fact that their identity related issues and accompanying needs may change over time.

Secondly, the chapter on reflexivity and the role of the researcher on the research illustrated that the researcher has an impact on many aspects of the research, including the data collection phase and the data analysis stage. Thus, it is possible that the same research could have been conducted by a different person, and different results could have been obtained. Thus, the results must be read with this in mind, and must not be taken as the absolute truth.

### **3.10. Reflexivity: the impact of the researcher on the research**

An important aspect of the voice-centered relational method of data analysis is the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a process of reflecting on how ones personal qualities and assumptions may impact on various aspects of the research process (Doucet & Mauthner, n.d). Once these

elements have been recognized, the researcher needs to find a way to accommodate the impact that he or she has had on the research process, for example, by making it explicit. The researcher's unique characteristics may affect the process of data collection by shaping the direction that the interviews take. By virtue of such things as personality, personal characteristics and beliefs; as well as theoretical inclinations and assumptions, individual researchers will ask unique questions and respond to the interviewees in unique ways that would probably not be replicated by another researcher. This unique interaction will partially determine the nature and content of the data that is collected. It is assumed that these same issues will impact on the process of data analysis. That is, that the way individual researchers interpret the data will be colored by the lenses through which they examine the data. The particular lenses they use are framed by the unique combination of their personal characteristics and theoretical assumptions. Given the impact of the researcher on the research, and in the interests of transparency, a discussion of the personal position of the researcher is warranted.

Perhaps a reflexive discussion should start by outlining and thus making evident for the reader, the personal characteristics of the researcher. I am a young, white woman with a much younger transracially adopted sister. I therefore had a personal interest in this issue. Due to the small-town nature of the context in which this research took place, the fact that I had a transracially adopted sister was known to some of the participants in this research. Where they did not already know, I told them. My reason for doing this was two-fold. Firstly, I required openness and honesty from my participants and I therefore felt that a certain level of openness and honesty was required from me. Secondly, I felt that it increased my credibility as someone who was genuinely interested in their experiences, and distinguished me from someone who was merely interested in them in a voyeuristic-type fashion. I feel that my personal experience with transracial adoption helped me to establish rapport with the research participants, both the children and their parents. However, I also need to consider the possibility that some of the participants may have downplayed the more negative aspects of their transracial adoption experience out of a desire to protect me from this knowledge. Although I have considered this possibility, after much reflection I do not believe that this played out in the research process. However, in making it transparent, the reader is in a position to assess this issue for themselves.

It is also possible that being a white person affected some of the collection of my data. Most of my participants identified themselves as white and only spoke English. I believe that my being an English-speaking white person may have influenced the way in which they spoke about themselves. It is also possible that the research participants may have downplayed aspects of their black racial identity in order to identify with me, as a white person. Had I been an isiZulu-speaking black person, it is possible that the participants may have felt embarrassed or apologetic about their racial identity, and may have emphasized the aspects of themselves experienced as black. It is therefore worth considering that the information I obtained regarding their racial identity may have been coloured by my own racial identity.

Through my reading of the literature, I approached the interviews with the understanding that these children could be struggling to form a black racial identity. This could have influenced the way I approached the interviews, and in particular, the types of questions that I asked. In the following extract concerning his name, one can see my assumption that a black racial identity was the identity that Thabo would be trying to engage with. This theoretical assumption biased the questions that I asked during this extract (first name and surname are pseudonyms):

R: Do you like your name?

J: Mm, I chose it cause it would have been Thabo Harper, but um, I wanted to, it sounded stupid Thabo Harper, so then I wanted to keep my Mom's surname and it was also my Mom's idea to keep it so then it was Thabo Mbatha Harper. To keep my Mom's surname *and* I get the Harper.

R: It sounds like it was important for you to keep something of your mom?

Thabo: Ya

R: Um, why does Thabo Hyde's sound stupid?

Thabo: It doesn't sound right, a Zulu name with an English surname, it doesn't sound right to me. Like with my ID book, they said I had to have one surname and she said Thabo Harper and I was like No! I'd rather have no ID book than have someone say Thabo Harper. But then we went to (name of place) and I got both my surnames.

R: So just having, like not having the Mbatha is like really bad.

Thabo: Yes

R: Um, and the Thabo, cause you say people often, because it's a Zulu name, people often think that you speak Zulu, that you're a proper Zulu boy.

Thabo: Ya

R: Would you prefer to have an English name, or do you like it?

Thabo: I wanted an English name first, but then my parents said No, you're a Zulu person, so then I kept my name.  
R: Do you feel like a Zulu person?

In my final question of this extract one can see the way in which my theoretical assumption impacted on the question I asked and consequently, in the direction that I led the interview. Having just expressed that *he* would have liked an English name, but his *parents* thought he should have a Zulu name, it may have been more appropriate to engage with his white racial identity. In this regard I could have asked him if he feels like an English person. However, given my assumptions, I did not do this.

A final personal characteristic that may have influenced the data collection process is the issue of my age. I am reasonably close in age to the participants, and I do believe that this helped me to establish rapport with them, and to get a more open account than had I been a lot older.

One of my major concerns at the outset of the data analysis was that my personal experience with transracial adoption should not affect the results that I obtained. Specifically, I very much wanted to believe that the research from America and Britain was accurate and that transracially adopted children were generally well adjusted and happy, with no major conflicts. I wanted this for my sister. However, I was aware that this was not necessarily the case, and I hope that this personal desire has not biased my interpretation of the data in this regard.

It is assumed that the same personal characteristics that may have affected the data collection process could have impacted on the process of data analysis. It is more difficult for me to understand the ways in which my personal characteristics may have impacted on the process of analysis. The reason for this is that I have attempted to conceptualize the results with as much conscious awareness about how I may have affected this process as possible. Any impact that these issues may have had on the analysis are therefore out of the realm of my awareness. However, my supervisor has also been instrumental in assessing the process of analysis, and in ensuring that overt bias due to my own personal position was not evident.

## **Chapter four**

### **Results**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The interviews with the participants created a wealth of data that was overwhelming in its richness. It must therefore be acknowledged that this results section is a focussed discussion of the data, and that there are certainly other issues that could have been discussed, but have not been. The analysis of the data was focussed on issues that related specifically to the original research questions and to the rather broad issue of identity. The original research questions consisted of three main questions, including: What is the collection, or repertoire, of internal and external positions that each transracially adopted child occupies, especially in relation to the identity relevant domains of adoption and race? How do the systems of relationships in which the child operates affect his or her identity? Is there a commonality of positions that these children occupy? This results chapter therefore answers these questions and offers a conceptual understanding of the identities of the participants in terms of the theory of the dialogical self. The separation of the results and the discussion chapters within qualitative research is occasionally a fairly artificial separation and this theoretical and conceptual understanding is not replicated in the discussion chapter of this research.

Although the sample was small and the personal circumstances of each participant were different, there were instances where common social, emotional and psychological experiences could be observed. Some of these common experiences will be discussed, specifically in terms of how these experiences relate to the identity of the participants. In addition to common experiences, contrasting experiences were also observed. These contrasting experiences will also be outlined, again in relation to the impact of these experiences on the identity of the participants. Where common and contrasting experiences were observed, explanations were sought and possible causal factors are discussed.

This results chapter is organised in two sections. The first section is a brief description of each participant. This has been done in order to provide the reader with a context for the results that

follow. The second section is the main results section, and this has been structured into four broad themes. These themes are thematically similar stories as told by the participants. Broadly, these themes include stories that relate to their biological families, stories of themselves as adopted children, stories of their encounters with racism and stories that concern their subjective experience of race. These were not the only stories told, but they are the stories that most significantly relate to the original research question. Within several of these themes, the significance lay in the fact that some children did not tell the stories that other children did. Where stories were absent, this is also discussed.

#### **4.2. A brief description of the sample**

##### **Thabo**

Thabo is a 16-year-old boy. His adoptive family consists of his parents and their three biological sons. His mother and two of his brothers currently live abroad and Thabo lives alone with his father. Thabo knows how he came to be adopted. Although he knew his adoptive family from infancy, he was a toddler when he was fostered by them and a pre-adolescent when he was eventually adopted. The source of his knowledge therefore comes both from stories recounted to him by his adoptive family, as well as from his own memories of critical events.

Thabo's biological mother was the daughter of the domestic worker of his adoptive family and she abandoned him to the care of his biological grandmother when he was born. His grandmother left him with his adoptive family when he was approximately 4 years old (although he was not adopted at the time). This was done very suddenly, with no warning or discussion. During the time between birth and being abandoned by his grandmother, he spent much time in the home of his adoptive family and felt very much a part of the family. Thabo has only ever met the woman in his biological family: his mother, grandmother, aunt and cousin. His cousin is the only one still alive and he does not know where she is, despite his adoptive parents trying to track her down several years ago. His birth mother and grandmother died subsequent to his adoption. He therefore has no contact with his biological family. Thabo has battled with learning difficulties



and spent several years in a special school for children with learning disorders. He is now attending a private school and has just completed grade 8.

### **Paul**

Paul is a 19-year-old boy whose birth mother was the domestic worker of the family that would later adopt him. Paul's birth mother had 8 other children and his father died before he was born. His birth mother suffered from postnatal depression, and it seems that she was never able to care for him properly as an infant. Most of his care-giving functions were transferred to her employees, who did this willingly as they had 'fallen in love' with Paul. Slowly, the employees became responsible for more and more of his care-giving and eventually, they were his primary care-givers. His birth mother left their employ suddenly and with no discussion. She has had virtually no contact with Paul since that time. Paul was never officially adopted, despite a great desire on his part and his 'adoptive' parent's part for this to happen. His adoptive family was concerned that should they introduce the notion of formal adoption, Paul's birth mother would react negatively and they would lose him. Paul's adoptive parents have two older biological children, and have also transracially adopted two younger children. Paul has just matriculated and is currently employed.

### **Nancy**

Nancy is a 15-year-old black girl who was fostered at the age of 18 months by her adoptive family. Her adoptive parents are married and have two older sons who are their biological children. Nancy's birth mother worked at the same company as Nancy's adoptive mother and died from cancer when Nancy was 18 months old. While she was dying, Nancy's biological mother asked Nancy's adoptive mother to look after Nancy once she had passed away, and Nancy's adoptive mother agreed to do this. Because of apartheid laws existing at the time, Nancy's adoptive family was unable to adopt her legally until she was about six years of age. Her birth father is alive, is known to her and agreed to the adoption. She has three birth siblings but has very little contact with her birth family and does not initiate contact with them. She is currently in grade 10 at a private girl's school.

## **Lerato**

Lerato is a 15-year-old girl who was fostered by her adoptive family at approximately one year of age. She was found abandoned in a rural area and was in a state of severe malnutrition and neglect. At the time, Lerato's adoptive mother was involved with fostering children in need of short term care, and this is how she became introduced to the family. Due to the apartheid laws prohibiting the adoption of a black baby by a white family, she was only formally adopted at about the age of 5. She was adopted at the earliest opportunity. Her adoptive family is a relatively large family. Her adoptive parents are married and she has five brothers and a sister. Lerato has never met her birth family and has virtually no information about them. If she wanted to trace her birth family at any stage she would have great difficulty due to the paucity of this information. Lerato is in grade 10 at a private school.

### **4.3. Me and my birth family**

The following section is a discussion of the stories of the participants' experiences with their birth families and how these experiences have impacted on their identity. The participants' contact with their birth families has been very different. Nancy and Paul know their birth families and could have access to them if they wanted to. Lerato was abandoned and therefore does not have much information regarding her birth family. Thabo only ever knew the female members of his family and all but one of them are deceased.

The experience of having contact with birth families appears to be one that is characterised by ambivalence and conflict. The adolescents in this sample appear to have difficulty negotiating the two families to which they belong – their white, upper income, urban, adopted family on the one hand, and their black, poor, rural, birth family on the other. The participants articulated feelings of being different to their birth families and of having a sense of themselves as not fitting in and not belonging to their birth families. In particular, they suggested that the cultural, socio-economic, as well as the language differences between their two families were too great and that they were not able to overcome these differences.

This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

- R: I'm wondering if keeping in touch with your roots is also for you about knowing a bit about your birth family?
- Paul: Um, not really. It's just really for me information. I don't really have much to do with my real family.
- R: Are they still around? Do you know who they are?
- Paul: Ya, cause we're from a big family, a family of nine, I was the last child. My brother's and sisters I don't even know exactly where they all are. Half of them are around. My mom, I chat to, jeesh, the last time I spoke to her was a year or two ago. When I was younger I'd go home and visit () but it's easier not to.
- R: Did you enjoy the contact?
- Paul: No cause it was totally different. Because this was home to me, this was my real brother and sister to me, my real mom and dad to me. And they're all very, very Zulu. So obviously very traditional in culture and they only speak Zulu, so it was difficult to fit in. You feel like you're the outsider!

In this extract, we can see that Paul positions himself as an outsider in relation to his birth family. This position of outsider seems to be specifically related to a perceived cultural difference on two dimensions. The first dimension appears to be that of the black, Zulu culture ('they're all very, very Zulu') as opposed to the white, English culture. Integral to this cultural difference is the issue of language and the fact that Paul literally could not communicate with his birth family as they only spoke isiZulu and he only spoke English. The second dimension appears to be that of a traditional, rural culture versus a westernised and urbanised culture. These cultural differences result in an internal position of self-as-outsider that relates directly to the external position of his birth family. His switch to the use of the second person 'you' ('you feel like you're the outsider'), seems to emphasise the way in which this self-as-outsider is experienced by Paul as uncomfortable and as not being consistent with his experience of himself. In contrast, his use of the word 'real' when first referring to his birth family ('I don't really have much to do with my real family') and then his later repetition, and different use of, the word 'real' in relation to his adoptive family ('my real brother and sister to me, my real mom and dad to me') seems to speak to his sense of himself as having genuine, more deeply experienced relationships with his adoptive family and his positioning of himself as more authentically fitting in with his adoptive family.

This sense of himself as belonging is further emphasised in the following extract:

Paul: I think like with my older bother and sister, I do love them, they *are* my older brother and sister. It was as if I was their white baby brother.

R: Like a blood brother.

Paul: Ya. They treat me just like a brother and sister.

This positioning of self-as-white appears to be less a reference to Paul's racial identity and more a reference to his sense of himself as being deeply connected to his adopted family. That is, this position of self-as-white or rather, self-as-blood-brother seems to point to Paul's sense of himself as truly belonging to his adoptive family to a degree suggestive of some underlying biological relatedness.

For Paul, these two internal positions of self-as-outsider and self-as-blood brother did not sit comfortably with each other, and there was a great deal of tension between them. The way in which Paul eventually resolved the tension around these two competing positions was to terminate contact with his biological family. In erasing access to this external position, the internal position of self-as-outsider no longer needed to be experienced and confronted, and life became 'easier'.

This experience of feeling different from one's birth family is evident in the second interview with Nancy. Rather than emphasising the cultural differences between them, Nancy emphasises that there were vast socio-economic differences between herself and her birth family, and that these differences made her feel very uncomfortable. Importantly, the wealth that she had grown up with seemed in stark contrast with her birth family's poverty. Negotiating these two families, who were so different to one another, was difficult for Nancy:

R: Would you like more contact with them or how do you feel about having contact with them?

Nancy: Well, I don't know, because I haven't really been brought up with them. I don't really know them, so I don't mind not talking to them or having contact with them. Because I don't know them.

R: It sounds like you take it quite casually. Would you prefer more contact with them or would more contact with them make you feel fairly uncomfortable?

Nancy: Ya, if I had contact with them I'd feel uncomfortable around them.

R: Why do you think you'd feel uncomfortable around them?  
 Nancy: I don't know, because I haven't been living with them. I don't know them. They're just like another black person to me. I don't know them, as well.  
 R: So they don't feel like family?  
 Nancy: No, they don't.  
 R: Do you think growing up in such a different circumstance has made a difference to you?  
 Nancy: Ya, I think it has. I think how I'm living now and how they're probably living, I feel uncomfortable about the way I'm living and they're living.  
 R: In what way do you imagine that they're living?  
 Nancy: I don't know, I imagine it to be quite poor.

The above extract illustrates Nancy's positioning of herself as privileged in relation to her birth family, a self-position that is experienced as very uncomfortable. In addition, another important position in relation to her birth family is self-as-stranger. On several occasions Nancy repeats the fact that she doesn't know her birth family, that they are strangers to her and that they are 'just another black person'. It is difficult to know exactly what Nancy means when she refers to her birth family as 'just another black person'. It appears fairly derogatory of black people, a grouping together of all black people who are then distanced and separated from herself. There is not a sense that she, as a black person, is connected in any way with other black people. It is possible that in separating herself from other black people, she distances herself from her birth family, and from any anxiety or emotional pain that she might feel in relation to them. However, in this moment, she seems to position herself as superior to black people in general, and to her birth family in particular. It is possible that this positioning of self-as-superior is a means of coping with the discomfort she experiences in relation to her birth family. One can speculate that by positioning herself as superior, Nancy is able to accommodate her position of privilege more easily, perhaps unconsciously believing that she is in some way more deserving of the privilege that she experiences. However, one wonders if she has in any way internalised this negative conception of black people.

In both of these cases we can see that when confronted with self positions that were experienced as uncomfortable (such as self-as-privileged, self-as-stranger), or in conflict with another position (self-as-outsider vs. self-as-blood-brother), the participants found it easier to distance themselves from the external position (birth family) that was creating the ambivalent or uncomfortable internal position.

In contrast, Lerato tells a very different story of her relationship with her birth family. Lerato was abandoned and has never met her birth family. In addition, she is unsure whether her biological mother is alive or dead. She nevertheless has an important relationship with her biological mother, one that is characterised by many unanswered questions, as illustrated below.

Lerato: Like I said to you, I don't know if it was last week or whether it was you, but I remember telling someone, that um, you always want to know like things about you, you always want to know, like why did my mother give me, why did she do this to me and like, why couldn't she look after me, like things like that. And like, you've always got questions to yourself. So like, I'm not saying it's a bad side, but when I think about it, it really hurts to know that, um, yeah. It's like, it's very difficult for me because knowing that - I don't even know what happened to me - but knowing that I was abandoned, it hurts to know that OK, somebody that God was given to look after me didn't want to look after me, and like, she just decided ok, fine. Maybe she was young, maybe she wasn't ready to look after me, fine, I'll understand that point of view, but it hurts to know that I was just like left. And ya, not knowing who I really was before I was adopted.

R: It sounds like you've got a lot of unanswered questions

Lerato: Yeah

R: And maybe you'd feel better if you just knew exactly what happened?

Lerato: Ya, sometimes I want to know, but then sometimes I don't want to know. Because it may affect me in the future of my life... Cause as I said, I've got a lot of unanswered questions and even maybe I would like them to be answered, but there's a stage of my life where maybe I wouldn't like them to be answered because it's like two way, 'cause what if OK, what if these people answer my questions and then it affects me in the future, I don't want that to happen to me. I want to just live my life and not know that if I get told this, that, and the other, it'll affect me in my life.

The above extract illustrates that for Lerato there is a lot of emotion around the issue of being abandoned by her birth mother. In her own words, it 'really hurts' her to think about her mother abandoning her. This internal position of self-as-abandoned seems to have given rise to her experience of having many questions about her birth mother. As a consequence, there appear to be at least two other positions operating simultaneously with this position of self-as-abandoned. Firstly, we can see that Lerato has many questions about her birth mother and about the circumstances around her own abandonment. This position of self-as-questioning or self-as-seeking however is in huge conflict with another aspect of herself, which is that she is afraid. She seems to shift between wanting to know and not wanting to know, between self-as-questioning and self-as afraid. There is a great degree of ambivalence around these two positions. Lerato's

ambivalence about knowing vs. not-knowing seems to be highlighted by her switch to the second person 'you' when referring to self-as-questioning ("you always want to know like things about you, you always want to know, like why did my mother give me, why did she do this to me and like, why couldn't she look after me, like things like that"). This switch seems to point to her attempt to distance herself from this self-as-questioning position, and highlights the anxiety she experiences whilst operating from this position.

Ultimately, Lerato seems to partially resolve some of the ambivalence around these two positions by choosing not to ask any questions about her birth mother and to allow her adoption story to remain a mystery. It seems that the position of self-as-afraid is too overwhelming and too closely connected to the hurt that she feels in the position of self-as-abandoned.

R: Do you know how you came to be adopted?

Lerato: No, I don't know. It's like, I don't know actually, I've never asked and I'm not intending to ask.

Although Lerato's case is very different to that of the first two cases described, we can again see that where too much ambivalence or tension was experienced between two internal positions (self-as-knowing and self-as-afraid), this conflict was resolved by suppressing one of the positions (self-as-questioning). This suggests that in all of these cases, not all of their internal positions in relation to the external position of birth family were equal in power. Rather, some internal positions appear to have greater authority than others.

#### **4.4. Me and my adoption**

The following section concerns the stories of the participant's subjective experiences of being adopted and how the expression of these stories reveals the impact that being adopted has had on their identity. In listening to the participant's stories of being adopted it became important to attend to both what was said and what was not said. If one went purely on the articulation of their stories, one would assume that the majority of the children in this sample spent no time thinking about being adopted, and in fact, had not considered that adoption was even a part of their identity. This apparent silence in relation to their adoptive identity seemed strange given the large amount of literature on adoptive identity.

For Lerato, the meaning that being adopted has for her is that she does not know a part of her history; she does not know her birth family and importantly she does not know her birth mother. The significance of this for Lerato is that in not knowing, she feels as though she does not properly know herself, as though a part of herself is missing. In talking about a scrapbook that her adoptive mother compiled for her, one is able to see how being adopted has impacted on Lerato's sense of identity:

R: And you're not sure where that (the scrap book) is anymore?

Lerato: (Laughing) I don't know whether I threw it away, or whether what I did with it. I don't know where it is.

R: Do you think you would have thrown it away?

Lerato: There was a stage of my life when I was really pissed off, so maybe I did throw it away, 'cause we cannot find it. We have looked like everywhere in this house. But its somewhere, I know I didn't throw it away; I know it's somewhere. I may have like ripped the pages out of it but its there.

R: What were you so pissed off about?

Lerato: Just a lot of things, like yeah, I was just pissed off. 'Cause like me, I don't as I said to you last week, I don't like, I don't like being told when I'm wrong and I don't like, how can I put it? Um, I just yeah, this whole, like my whole life story it happened in the past and that's where I want it to be, I don't like people bringing it up again, so like, that means that I'd have to go through that stage of my life again when I was like, this is what happened, so, ya.

R: Were you pissed off that you were, that your mom died and that you were adopted and, just the whole story really, around your adoption?

Lerato: Ya, there was a stage in my life when I was like that. Because like me, how can I say it? I wanted to know who I really was, I wanted to know who my mother was. And so like, to be with (adoptive mother) and them, was something different for me, 'cause like ok, how come this and this and this, how come I don't have my mother, like, I wanted to know where she was, why did she leave me and things like that.

R: It sounds like you didn't get all the answers though

Lerato: No, I didn't...

Lerato's anger reveals the amount of conflict she experiences with regards to her adoptive identity. The core issue for her and the aspect of being adopted that caused her to be so angry was that she wanted to 'know who she really was'. We are able to see that for Lerato, her birth family (an external position) is experienced as a part of her identity (an internal position). In not knowing anything about her birth family, she does not know a part of herself. In this case, self-as-adopted is in constant dialogue with another internal position, self-as-unknown or self-as-missing. It is as though the question mark in the external position of birth family creates a



corresponding question mark within her internal world. This gap in her identity creates a lot of anger and confusion.

In comparison, Nancy, Paul and Thabo verbalised no issue with the fact that they are adopted and seemed to engage with this aspect of themselves very little. In contrast to Lerato, these children all had some contact with their birth families, and so perhaps for them there is no great question mark hanging over this aspect of their identity. However, one would expect that they would engage at some level with the issue of being abandoned by a birth family with whom they had a relationship, and this did not appear to be the case. The question was then asked: is this lack of engagement due to the fact that they are genuinely not concerned with their adoptive identity, or is it because engagement with their adoptive identity is too threatening?

In the previous section, the children's relationships with their birth families were discussed. It was suggested that contact with birth families created some ambivalent internal positions for the adolescents in this sample. In relation to their birth families these children felt like outsiders, as though they did not belong. In order to deal with these uncomfortable internal positions, these children cut off contact with their birth families, and identified strongly with their adoptive families. Within their adoptive families, they had a sense of belonging and fitting-in that they did not have within their birth families. Through the discussion on birth families it becomes clear that engaging with an adoptive identity meant that these children would also have to engage with the issue of having two families. They were not really able to do this, and so a lack of engagement with an adoptive identity could possibly be seen as a reflection of their difficulty negotiating two families. The issue of their adoption is relatively silent within their internal world. However, this silence could stem from conflict between internal positions that the children were unable to negotiate, rather than from a real acceptance of their adoptive identity.

In understanding the silence around their adoptive identity, another issue was explored. All three participants who did not appear to have engaged with the issue of their adoption expressed a feeling of being lucky, of being fortunate that they had been adopted. These participants had all imagined what life would have been like had they not been adopted, and all three participants had imagined a similar scenario. This was a scenario of poverty, of a lack of education and

opportunity, and potentially, a life spent living on the streets. The next two examples illustrate this positioning of self-as-lucky:

- R: Do you ever think about the kind of life you might have had if you had stayed with your birth mother?
- Paul: Ya, I mean I don't think about it often, but it would have been totally different. They live in a rural settlement. Life would have been totally, totally different. We wouldn't have had much money, different friends, wouldn't have had the sporting opportunities, the friend opportunities, you know? Just opportunities, there's no opportunities out there. I would have ended up a garden boy. I think I was lucky.
- R: What's it like for you to think of that? Cause it must be quite weird for you to sit here and think that that could have been you but it wasn't.
- Paul: Ya, I feel really blessed, like I'm the lucky one.
- 
- R: Ya. Do you ever think about what your life would have been like if you had stayed with your grandmother, or your birth family?
- Thabo: I do. I don't think about it, I just say luckily I wasn't staying with them 'cause then I would be like on the streets and stuff. That's all I say sometimes, like to my parents and stuff. Like when I see street children I think that could have been me.
- R: Mm. What's that like for you?
- Thabo: I just always say to myself that I'm very fortunate to have the family and stuff and people to care for me.
- R: So you imagine that the future you would have had would have been very different.
- Thabo: It would have been. I don't know where I would have lived, who I would have stayed with.

Both the above extracts illustrate that these children have positioned themselves as lucky in relation to their adoption. This is a fairly powerful position within their internal world, especially for the second participant, Thabo. Whereas Paul suggests that he only thinks about being lucky occasionally (Ya, I mean I don't think about it often), Thabo expresses the fact that he thinks about himself as lucky fairly often (I just always say to myself). Nevertheless, being grateful, and feeling lucky (taking an internal position of self-as-lucky), may constrain other positions that may be in conflict with this position. One can speculate that feeling lucky implies a feeling of being grateful, and it is difficult to express any negative thoughts or feelings around being adopted without appearing ungrateful. Thus, the silence around adoption may be due to the power that this self-as-lucky position has over the potential to dialogue with other more conflicting positions.

The only participant who displays ambivalence around being lucky is also the participant who has engaged with her adoption in a very intense and emotional way, thus lending support for this line of argument.

R: So do you sometimes feel lucky to have been adopted or do you feel that you might have led a better life if you hadn't been adopted, or...?

Lerato: It's a two-way thing. Cause sometimes I'll be like ok, maybe if I had my mom I could have done this, things more the way I want to. But then other times I'll be like no, actually I'm wrong. Maybe it's a good thing I was adopted. Maybe, cause these people are teaching me to go on the right track. 'Cause like other people their parents teach them to go on the wrong track. Well, actually they don't teach them but ya, like me, whereas my parents teach me like, ok, I have to go on this track and I have to stay on the right track, I can't keep on going left right and centre, I have to like stay on the right track all my life.

This participant did not define herself as lucky spontaneously, but did so in response to a direct question by the researcher. In response to this question, she suggests that she is lucky, but that it is not a simple thing. Rather, it is a 'two way thing', where her belief that she would have had more freedom living with her biological mother is balanced with her gratitude for the more conservative way in which her adoptive parents have raised her. Thus, she suggests that there are both negative and positive aspects to being adopted and it is not a simple and clear cut matter of being lucky.

Thus it appears that the strength of this position of self-as lucky differs across the participants. However, where it is very strong there appears to be a weaker capacity for dialogue between other conflicting positions that relate to being adopted, such as being angry, or wishing that the adoption had never occurred.

#### **4.5. Stories of encounters with racism and how these impact on identity**

One of the participants told several stories of his encounters with racism, although negative experiences with racism were not specifically addressed within the interview schedule. This prominence of encounters with racism was not evident in the stories of the other participants.

This prominence, contrasted with the relative absence of such stories in the other participants, appeared interesting, and a possible explanation was sought.

Thabo tells several stories of his encounters with racism. Although only one such story will be provided in this discussion, all of these stories have a similar theme, and all of them seem to be resolved in a similar way. Most of these stories are told as a series of events with very little emotion expressed. He tells of a young boy who, by virtue of his place as a black person in a racist society often gets discriminated against, but through his associations with his more empowered white father, gains a right to respect that otherwise would not be his. His father appears to be an important character in these stories and it seems as though the role of rescuer, which was initiated when his adoptive family first took in Thabo, is still played out today.

R: Um, when people ask about the fact that you're adopted, what do you tell them?

Thabo: When people ask if I'm adopted I tell them I am. First, first if like, when we went to a stall once and it was in Pinetown and then they sell all those cheap biscuits and stuff. My dad bought from them, and there was lots of black people there, only like black people buying from there, like bulk stuff and then I was standing there holding this stuff and my dad said 'just go and stand in the line' and I stood in it- not with all the other people - and the guy like said 'go over there' to stand in the other queue. And then I said 'I'm waiting for my Dad' and he says 'No, go over there', then my Dad came and then I didn't go into the line I just stood there and then my Dad came and then my Dad said 'No, this is my son' and then he like looked back and said 'oh, sorry'.

R: So he was quite surprised that your dad was a white man.

Thabo: Ya, it happens a lot

R: Um, so you say it happens quite a lot

Thabo: Mmm, in some places when we go out

R: It sounds like you come across racism quite a bit

Thabo: (Silence) I do.

R: When you come across racism and you realise that people are discriminating against you because you're black, how do you deal with that?

Thabo: (Silence) I don't know, I just ignore it, go away, do something else

R: And does it make you feel worse about yourself or does it not really affect you too much, or...

Thabo: It doesn't really bother me

R: Do you think that when people find out that you're adopted they treat you the same as any other kid, or do you think you sometimes feel like they treat you differently?

Thabo: They, they treat me um, better than what they did when they first, before they saw my Dad or my surname.

In this extract one can see that being adopted means that Thabo receives social credibility and respect that he would probably not gain if he were not adopted. Significantly, this is Thabo's most important association with being adopted, and it is this preferential social treatment that informs his adoptive identity. This can be seen by the way in which he automatically links the question on adoption with his stories of racism and of being treated with more respect once people find out that he is adopted. Other people in society appear to give his white identity a lot more respect than his black identity. Thus we can see how Thabo's encounters with racism impact on both his adoptive identity as well as his racial identity. Because he has been adopted, he has been given access to a white identity that in the eyes of others is more worthy of respect than his black identity. In responding to racism, Thabo seems to withdraw and remain silent. It seems that he does not actively respond to this racism, and perhaps he is not sure what to do in the face of it.

Although the other participants did not report this kind of experience. Whilst reading the transcripts from the interviews with the parents, a common theme amongst some of the parents appeared to be that they had experienced much social isolation since adopting their child. Two of the parents reported almost identical experiences of having to curtail social activities in order to avoid racist encounters with people. Thus it seemed that some of the parents had been sensitive to racist attitudes from other people. In response, these parents had adjusted their activities so as to avoid potential racist encounters. Thus they had been able to protect their children from exposure to racism.

R: It sounds like you've had experience with adopting and fostering black *and* white children; do you think that there are any specific challenges to adopting transracially?

A: I think the other people's reactions to it. I'm very sensitive to those reactions and I'm very protective of the child so I've noticed that I've isolated myself because of the child. I tend to avoid situations where the child will be stared at, commented on. It might not be as bad now with (name of younger, unrelated, transracially adopted child), I don't know, but there's a lot of chattering and comments.

R: What kind of situations are you referring to?

A: We went to (name of beach) with her. That's a very conservative beach, which we used to go to a lot. We actually in the end sold our time-share because people felt uncomfortable with her on the beach and at the flat they would keep their children

away. And all the children would be happy and then the parents I could see were uncomfortable... 'Go back to the maid's room' they'd say to her... they'd assume... I don't know. And I didn't want her to be hurt. But I think it has affected her, I'm sure.

(Mother of female participant)

Here we can see that Lerato's adoptive mother and father have been sensitive to racism, and have gone to great lengths to protect their child from racist encounters. In contrast, Thabo's father answers the same question with the following response:

R: Have there been any challenges to adopting transracially?

G: I say no, tongue in cheek cause we did have one friend and he called her auntie, but when we went to the farm where this lady's son lives there was a little bit of friction. So we never bothered going there again. So, you know.

R: Did it seem that there was a bit of racism coming from that family?

G: Mmm, very much so, in fact, I was going to report them you know. I mean, I'm not a racist by any means, I'm an (name of country of origin) you know, I'm not an Afrikaner or someone who was brought up in Africa. So you know, it doesn't worry me so much. Ya, so there was a little bit of racism.

R: Has that been the only incident really?

G: Ya, the only one, in all the years, not even when he was fostered, we've never had a problem.

(Father of male participant)

Although he does react to racism when he encounters it, Thabo's father seems less sensitive to racist attitudes by other people. In not really being aware of racism, he has not made any overt attempts to protect his son from racist encounters. What all of these experiences seem to highlight is the extent of racism within the South African context. The degree to which this racism impacts on the identity of transracially adopted children appears in part to be mediated by parents' responses to it.

#### **4.6. Me and my experience of race**

The following discussion focuses on the references that the participants made about themselves in terms of race. It will be seen that in this sample there are both common subjective experiences of race as well as contrasting subjective experiences of race. In seeking a possible explanation for both these commonalities and differences, the parents' approach to their children's racial identity appeared to offer some valuable insights. This discussion is therefore broken into two

parts. The first part of the discussion focuses on a description of the adolescents' racial identities, or what has been referred to as their subjective experience of race. The second part of the discussion focuses on the parents' approach to their children, specifically in light of their children's experiences of race.

None of the participants had a clear or coherent subjective sense of their racial identity. That is, none of the participants experienced themselves as either white or black across both time and space. Rather, all of the participants appeared to have the capacity to shift at times between experiencing themselves as white to experiencing themselves as black. However, this seemed to exist along a continuum. Three of the participants appeared to primarily experience themselves as white but would occasionally move out of this self-as-white position to a self-as-black position. On the other hand, one of the participants seemed to primarily experience herself as black, but would infrequently assume a self-as-white position. The question then arose: was either of these two scenarios problematic or preferable, and what were the particular conflicts or benefits associated with each of them?

For participants who operated primarily from a self-as-white position, it did not seem that they had engaged in a dialogue with their self-as-black identity and this position was relatively silent within the realm of their internal dialogue. For these participants the position of self-as-white appeared to be closely related to self-as-belonging, that is, a sense of belonging within their biological families. Thus, participants who experienced themselves as being more white than black appeared to have easier relationships with their adoptive parents, and a greater sense of belonging within their adoptive families. In addition, these adolescents had chosen to cut off contact with their biological families. It is possible that the suppression of their black identities, as evidenced by the lack of dialogue between the two positions of self-as-white and self-as-black, was facilitated by the absence of contact with their biological families. In contrast, the participant who positioned herself very firmly as belonging with a black culture, and who operated primarily from a self-as-black position, Lerato, seemed to have done this at the cost of a sense of belonging within her adoptive family. However, this participant seemed to have engaged with the issue of her racial identity more than the other participants, and there appeared to be a greater degree of dialogue between her position of self-as-black and her contrasting and

conflicting position of self-as-white. In addition, the ease with which Lerato moved between her two racial positions seemed to be done with a greater degree of flexibility and lesser degree of anxiety than that of the other participants.

In the following extract one can see how Lerato positions herself primarily as belonging to the 'black culture'. This positioning of herself as black seems to come from her childhood experience of having contact with a black family where she was able to learn the rules and norms of this black culture to which she refers. This positioning of herself as black becomes clear through the extract in several ways. However, although she refers to herself as black, she also acknowledges that she is in some ways white, and it is apparent that she is able to move fairly flexibly from her internal position of black, to her internal position of white. Furthermore, that this movement between internal positions seems to be mediated by the external position of culture, and more specifically, to various cultural practices with which she either feels comfortable or uncomfortable.

Lerato: In the black culture its like when older people are talking its rude for a child, well not a child, for someone my age to go and sit and listen to their conversation and join in with that conversation. But like for her (a white family friend of the same age), she finds that there's no problem with that. Whereas um, I don't know about you guys but... me, I just, I can't do that. Like I'll prefer us to go and sit somewhere and even if we talk like rubbish, that's cool. But I just don't feel like that its right for me to go and sit with her parents and my parents and like sit and join them in their conversation. I just, and...

R: Is that because you're black?

Lerato: Yeah, but as I've told you, I'm a bit of both but then when I see like I don't think I should be talking at this point, then I'll be like ok, I'll keep quiet. But when its something I know I can join in... like my mom she'll forever be telling me she'll be like, you must stop keeping quiet because ok, in the white culture they think its rude if you just come and sit there. Like from what my mom told me, that many people think I'm rude, that like when they're talking and I'm just sitting looking at them, they'll think its rude, how come she's just keeping quiet and not saying anything? Whereas me, I'll be ok, maybe it would be rude if I just sat there and don't say something but...

R: Where did you learn these rules of the black culture, because you haven't grown up with them?

Lerato: Um, my auntie, my gran, *haibo*, my godmother, who named me (middle name), I went to her house, she lives in (name of place). So like, since I was young, that's how I learnt Zulu. Since I was young I've been going up there, I always go up there and ya, I still go there occasionally. But ya, I used to go there. And like,



cause they'd sometimes be doing like sometimes they'll have *ilobolo*?, they'll have like all these Zulu cultures and then I'd get to learn them and also they'd teach me about, she'll be like, cause she just thinks that its not right for me being a black person not to have that understanding, not to understand my culture, not to know anything about it, so she...

R: And do you agree?

Lerato: Do I agree? *Hau!* ??? Um, in a sense I do and in a sense I don't. Hey because ya, I should know what's up and about with Zulu culture but then I don't really need to know. It's actually, ya, its your choice whether you want to know or not. Because she even asked me, she's like Lerato its your choice whether you want to know about your culture. 'Cause you're going to meet up with black people, so *wena*, you can say whether you want to learn about your culture or not. So.

R: And have you wanted to learn about it?

Lerato: I told her yeah, but then when there's something that like, I don't like about this culture, like when I see that OK, this I don't actually like about this culture, then I'll just be like ok fine, I'll learn it, I'll know it but then when it comes into progress...

R: You don't use it

Lerato: Ya

R: What are the things you don't like?

Lerato: This whole *ilobolo* issue, oh my word, it just doesn't go with me. Like, many of my friends are like, oh I just can't wait for my husband to come and *ilobolo* me and all this stuff. But like for me, cause I've grown up with white people and like I've been to many white weddings. I just think, just go get married, get it over with it. Not this thing that people have to bring cows and oh!

In this extract we can see that Lerato differentiates herself, as a black person, from the researcher, as a white person (I don't know about you guys but... me, I just, I can't do that). In this moment of contrasting herself from the researcher she appears to be operating from a position of self-as-black. Furthermore, this position of self-as-black is associated with the external position of cultural rules and norms: I as a black person adhere to certain rules of acceptable behaviour that you as a white person do not. From her early exposure to black role models, Lerato has learnt the rules of her black culture. In the example that she gives in this extract, it appears that she has accepted a custom of not joining in conversations with adults and has integrated this custom into her subjective sense of who she is, particularly with regard to race.

Although Lerato speaks perfect English, she also uses many expressions that are more typically used by isiZulu speaking people. For example, when expressing emotion during the extract she exclaims *Haibo!* and *Hau!* and uses the isiZulu word '*wena*' when relating a conversation that

she had with her godmother. We can see by Lerato's use of language (whether consciously or unconsciously) that she literally uses dialogue in order to position her identity in terms of race.

When we come to the end of the extract we can see that Lerato does not stick firmly to this position of self-as-black, and it is not consistent across space and time. Whilst Lerato has learnt about her black culture, and has accepted many of the cultural norms into her identity, some of the cultural practices do not sit comfortably with her. In addition, there are definitely times when she operates from a position of self-as-white (she makes it clear that she is not only black, but a bit of both black and white, and she finds the cultural practice of *ilobolo* in conflict with her experience of white weddings). Many of the black cultural practices do not cause an excessive amount of tension between her two internal positions of self-as-white and self-as-black.

However, it appears that some of these practices come into conflict with her contrasting internal position of self-as-white. Furthermore, it is possible that when the degree of conflict between these positions is too great, she rejects the cultural practice that causes this internal conflict ("when there's something that like, I don't like about this culture, like when I see that OK, this I don't actually like about this culture, then I'll just be like ok fine, I'll learn it, I'll know it but then when it comes into progress... I won't use it"). This rejection of certain cultural practices is a conscious one and appears to be done via an internal dialogue between her self-as-white position and her self-as-black position. In this regard, it seems that her dialogue goes something as follows: as a black person I will know my culture and the rules and practices of my culture. However, as a person who has been heavily influenced by the white culture, I will not use all of these cultural practices, as they make no sense to me. In this way, it seems that she rejects an external position in order to find a way to accommodate both her self-as-white position as well as her self-as-black position. Consequently, it seems that she is able to negotiate two opposing I-positions through dialogue.

It has already been mentioned that this racial positioning came at a cost for Lerato. The cost appears to be that in positioning herself as black, she has positioned herself as different and opposite to her adoptive mother. Consequently her relationship with her mother is very fraught and characterised by much conflict.

This is evidenced in the following extract:

- Lerato: Yeah, because like, on many terms, how can I put it? Many people don't like people who are loud and talkative, like my mom, she's always telling me to pipe down, she'll be like, stop screaming, don't shout. Like when I'm outside when I'm with my friends, we'll shout to each other even if she's like next door – 'cause my friend lives next door – say I'm standing here – instead of walking to the gate and talking to her, we'll scream to each other across the fence
- R: Why's that?
- Lerato: I don't know, it's just like in our culture to do that. We don't, like, many black people when we talk like, have you ever noticed you know, like if you've got a lady who works at your house, if she's talking to one of her friends across the road they'll shout to each other. Like, as in you guys, you'll go to each other and have a conversation.
- R: Ya
- Lerato: Ya, we will just like talk and we'll shout and then my Mom's like, no, why don't you just go to her, its not going to take much effort and I'll be like *cha*, this is just me
- R: Do you feel like you and your mom come from two different cultures and you don't quite understand each other?
- Lerato: That's like most of our problems. She comes from one perspective and I come from another. Like, how can I put it? Because like, I'm around my friends like most of the time, like most of my day I spend at school and most of my friends are black, so like, they teach me about black culture and they tell me, OK, this is this and this is this and this. So I understand my culture more than what she does. So, she'll come from this sort of culture and I'll come from this culture so like, it's not a one on one thing.

In this extract we can see that Lerato again positions herself as black ('many black people when we talk', and, 'it's in our culture'). Importantly, this positioning is done in contrast to her mother, who is white and therefore does not understand the cultural norms by which Lerato operates. For Lerato, the fact that her mom does not understand the cultural norms means that her mom does not understand her, displaying the extent to which cultural practices have been integrated into Lerato's sense of self.

Another key element of this extract is that Lerato's friends at school play an important role in terms of providing her with access to her black culture. These are black friends who teach her about her black culture. By interacting and learning from her friends, Lerato is able to experience herself as black. In a similar light, Lerato refers to her godmother who she spent a lot of time with as a young girl. This godmother is a black woman who taught Lerato to speak fluent isiZulu

and who also provided instruction on her black culture. Thus, it was also in the context of her relationship with her godmother that Lerato's black identity was developed. These relationships therefore appear to have been significant in terms of mediating Lerato's racial identity. However, through these experiences of learning from others and from developing her black identity through interacting with others, Lerato feels that she understands her black culture more than her mother does. This is no doubt a correct perception, but this knowledge gap seems to increase the emotional distance between herself and her adoptive mother and increases the conflict between them.

Much attention has been paid to the case of Lerato as it was felt that she represented a contrasting case to the other adolescents in the sample. She seemed to position herself more clearly as black, and she appeared to have had enabling relationships with black people that the other adolescents had not had. Consequently, it was felt that she represented a fairly strong link between access to black culture via relationships with black people, and a stronger sense of self as black.

Like Lerato, Thabo appears to shift between defining himself as black and defining himself as white. As such he seems to hold two internal positions in terms of race. In his case, there does not appear to be very much conflict between these two positions, and he seems to move fairly effortlessly between them. The following two extracts demonstrate how he does this:

R: Um, when you're at school or, anywhere really, are there times when you feel that you don't really fit in?

Thabo: Mmm

R: When are those times?

Thabo: Well, once when we went to (name of overseas country) and then this always happens whenever we go out with the family only, but I only say this, and I did it yesterday, with my friend, but I do it as a joke sometimes, like I said 'Look, I'm like' ... cause all my friends are white – like those are the only, I've got like maybe 3 or 4 black friends and then all the rest are white.

R: Oh really

Thabo: Ya, and then, cause like I was like standing and I was saying 'Look (name of friend), I'm the only black guy here whose not working here'. And his dad heard and his dad starts laughing and stuff. When we went out, when we went to (name of overseas country) I was saying, we went to my aunties farewell and there was not one black person in there, not even a waiter. And then my brother says 'hey

Thabo, you're the only black guy in the room, run away'. But he was, he always does that as a joke. And like, when you see the family photo's, you see like everybody's white and you just see the one black guy and my brother says – the one that's in (name of overseas country) now – he says how come we put the garden boy in the family photo and stuff like that.

Thabo: Mm, sometimes.

R: When you're at the (name of event) like that, cause you're the only black guy with all those white people, do you feel like you fit in with the white people?

Thabo: (Pause) Ya, sometimes, cause like my friend said, um, something and he said, after I said that my friends cousin who I made friends with, he said, he said, 'ya, how come you're not working?' and I said 'no, I'm white, just like you guys', and then they just started laughing.

The same participant continues with this issue later:

Thabo: I wanted an English name first, but then my parents said 'No, you're a Zulu person', so then I kept my name.

R: Do you feel like a Zulu person?

Thabo: Sometimes. Like my dad says I am sometimes because of the music I listen to and the way I dress and stuff.

R: Do you think he's right?

Thabo: Sometimes ya, cause I still like, when like all my friends say what music do you listen to? And I listen to this and they say no, that's black people's music, and then sometimes I'll say yes, but like, what am I? I'm black and then it's like, I listen to some white people music but mostly it's black.

The apparent lack of tension between his two internal positions of race seems to be due to Thabo's use of humour. He uses his racial identity in order to make others laugh. However, this veneer of laughter may mask some of the dynamics that could be operating with regards to Thabo's racial identity. From the example that Thabo gives about being overseas and having his brother tell him to run away, one gets the sense that within his family at least, Thabo's physical dissimilarity from the family is constructed as humorous and a source of amusement. For Thabo then, his racial identity of self-as-black appears to be linked via his family with other internal positions of self-as-joke and self-as-physically different and physically prominent. In addition, when his brother says 'how come we put the garden boy in the family photo', one becomes aware that his family's construction of race is based on an awareness and articulation of the power differences between white and black people that have traditionally existed in South Africa. Importantly, Thabo's sense of himself as black is occurring through a dialogue with his family. This dialogue centres on a construction of blackness that is superficial (based on physical

differences and taste in music), unequal (reference to 'garden boy') and one that is not to be taken seriously (self-as-joke). It is therefore not surprising that when Thabo makes reference to himself in relation to race, he does so only in the context of explaining himself to other people. One gets the impression that although he articulates two opposing racial positions, and although there is not much voiced tension around these two positions, there is also not very much dialogue between them. Rather, Thabo's internal positions of race appear relatively silent in terms of his own voice and seem to rather reflect a mere compliance with the voice of others. Thus, it is possible that individuals may differ with regards to the 'embeddedness' of various internal positions within the self, and the degree of ownership they may experience over some of their internally experienced positions.

In contrast to Lerato and Thabo, Nancy operates from a predominantly white racial identity. In speaking about herself she makes reference to herself as a coconut and an 'Oreo' biscuit. By this she means that she is someone who is white on the inside but black on the outside.

Nancy: Well, I am basically a white person! And, like, I don't know the Zulu religion or whatever. They (black girls at school) ask me questions like, "Nancy do you know the traditional weddings?" and I say, "Well, no," and they laugh about it and say, "Wow, but you're black!" and I say ya, but you know that I've been growing up in an adoptive family. You know that I've got a white mom and dad and brothers. And they say to me, "Well, so you're black, you should you know." So I'm like ugh, gosh.

R: Do you feel that other people expect that you should behave more black?

Nancy: No, my black friends, in my grade, my friends say to me why don't you learn Zulu? Because you know it is your religion. Not my religion! My culture. But I tried it in junior school, we had to do Zulu, and I tried it and I found it very difficult to do.

R: When you say you're basically a white person, what do you mean by that?

Nancy: I've grown up in a white family so I'm basically white inside. Like, an English girl, like speaking English is normal to me. Like for the Zulu girls they think Zulu is their first language. So I speak English and I come from a white family.

R: Are there parts of you that feel black?

Nancy: No, I've actually never thought of that! Um, no I don't think so. Like apart from my skin.

In this extract Nancy positions herself as unequivocally white. She assumes a white identity and does not appear to have much awareness of a part of herself that is experienced as black. We are able to see that there is very little dialogue between her internally experienced self-as-white

position, and a potential internal position of self-as-black. This is evidenced by her articulation that she has never thought about herself as black before. On the face of it, this lack of dialogue suggests less tension and conflict between two very contrasting racial positions. Thus, one is forced to ask the question: is this apparent lack of a black identity problematic? In answering this question it was felt that although this position of self-as-white was for the most part fairly uncontested, it was at the same time a fairly fragile position and one that was easily jeopardised. At the time of the interview, Nancy had recently been teased by a group of black girls at her school for being raised by a white family. The following extract reflects on her reaction to this teasing.

R: And when you were spending a lot of time in your room thinking about it (being teased by three black girls), what were the kinds of things you were thinking?

Nancy: Like, maybe I don't fit in. Maybe I should get to know my culture more. Or maybe when I get married to a black man I should have a traditional wedding. Or learn Zulu.

R: So it sounds like you were starting to question some of what you had been taking for granted? And what did that make you feel like, to start questioning and having those doubts.

Nancy: I felt like as though I'm missing out on something. But then I thought, no, if it was meant for me to spend time with my real family I would. If I was meant to be speaking Zulu, well I should speak Zulu, but it, if it was meant to be that I live with my real family then I would be. And get to know my culture more then I would be. But I do feel I should get to know my culture and get to learn to speak Zulu.

This extract concerns an incident where girls at school questioned Nancy's internal position of self-as-white. This external questioning facilitated an internal dialogue of self-questioning, characterised by enormous doubt about her previously uncontested racial identity. She was eventually able to resolve her angst about herself as a black person by taking a fatalistic view of her life, and by assuming that a 'force' greater than her was in control of her life, and that everything was as it should be. However, it does not appear that this was a particularly satisfactory solution to her. She acknowledges that although she thinks that her life is as it should be, she does still think that she should learn more about her culture, and that she should learn to speak isiZulu. Thus, her solution to the problem in terms of fatalism still leaves a question mark over her black identity. The presence of this question mark seems to keep the capacity for

dialogue between herself as white and herself as black open, regardless of her attempts to shut this dialogue down.

It would appear from the case of Nancy that although a transracially adopted child might be able to grow up with a fairly uncomplicated racial identity, this racial identity is probably reasonably fragile and is likely to be challenged at some point. When this happens, a great deal of anxiety may occur as children who have not been exposed to black role models may lack guidance on how to start a dialogue with another racial position. Thus, the child may not know how to approach this task and could feel fairly confused and possibly even frightened as a result. However, if the child's racial identity is not challenged in a negative way, but is done in a gentler manner, this process of starting a dialogue with another racial position may be experienced as less threatening.

Paul appears to be similar to Nancy in terms of having grown up with a relatively clear white racial identity and like Nancy, feels very nested within his adoptive family. He is, however, slightly older and since leaving school has been working alongside Zulu men from fairly rural areas. This experience has been a pleasant one for him, and seems to have had the result of initiating a dialogue with a black identity that he had previously not engaged with. This is a tentative dialogue though, and not one he is ready to engage with much intensity. Nevertheless, this dialogue is happening with the help of these men from work, who seem to be instructing him on his black culture. Thus, the importance of role models is once again highlighted.

Paul: Even the guys at work they tell me about their family traditions and Zulu traditions, it interests me. It's nice to know.

R: Do you seek out that information or do people just happen to tell you?

Paul: No, it's just situations. I don't go looking for it but if they're talking about it and I'll hear them in passing and I'll say, "What's going on and they'll say, 'In our tradition, the Zulu tradition, it's this and that.'"

R: It sounds like you don't seek it out but when it comes your way you're quite curious about it?

Paul: Ya, it's interesting, it's nice to know about all that stuff. Because, I mean ya, like modern people, I mean all traditions in all cultures they fade away as you get more technology or whatever. But it is just interesting to know. Not that I'm going to stick to any of it, but ya, it is nice to know.



- R: I'm wondering, it's sounds like you've learned about it in terms of knowledge; does any of it connect with you? Like, does it feel like some of it is part of who you are?
- Paul: Ya, in a way. It's just when I really () why certain things happen, for what reason.
- R: Can you give me an example?
- Paul: (P) Um, well, like in a way, like today this one guy at work they, he has to slaughter an animal, for good luck. I never knew this but he's got to slaughter an animal, I think once a year it's quite a big ceremony. And they have to do this for good luck, and its not all families, it depends on if your forefathers have done it and what surname you have. Um, so someone with the same surname as you, you're not to have a relationship with, whether they have got nothing to do with you, you've never met them before, they've got no connection with you. Nothing, it's just like that.
- R: And it sounds like a part of you feels like you come from that. Like that is a part of your history and who you are.
- Paul: Ya, you don't want to lose all of your culture, because that is part of you, it's your background.

One can see here the beginnings of a dialogue with a black racial identity. This racial identity, or self-as-black, is still a new experience for Paul, and not one that he is committing to at this point ('...it is just interesting to know. Not that I'm going to stick to any of it, but ya, it is nice to know'). In this regard, his engagement with his black culture is still at the level of knowledge, although he does say that this knowledge connects with him at a more fundamental level. However, in speaking about himself as engaging with his black culture, he shifts from an 'I' position to a 'you' position, indicating that this position is still experienced as relatively foreign to him ('Ya, you don't want to lose all of your culture, because that is part of you, it's your background.'). Importantly, through this gentle initiation with his black identity, we do not see the level of angst and anxiety that we saw in the case of Nancy. This emphasises the importance of the manner in which transracially adopted children are introduced to their birth culture.

#### **4.7. Language as a barrier to communication with other black people**

One of the participants speaks fluent isiZulu because of her early instruction in isiZulu. None of the other participants are able to speak isiZulu however, and this seemed to arise as a common theme in terms of the barrier that this represented when trying to communicate with other black people. It has already been suggested that access to black people, and in particular, access to black role models who are able to facilitate a process of engagement with a black identity is

important. An inability to communicate with such people therefore represents a fairly significant barrier in terms of forming a black racial identity. The themes around the issue of language were so similar across the participants that extracts from one participant have been chosen to represent the issue of language for all of the participants. The following extracts suggest the degree to which isiZulu formed a barrier in terms of forming relationships with a fairly wide range of different people in his life.

Paul: ...But I mean my birth family I really have got nothing to do with them. I mean some of them I haven't seen for so long I can't even picture their faces anymore. I was so small, I had nothing to do with them, I didn't speak Zulu so I didn't even ever get to know them or anything, so in a way they're like nothing to me. If one of them had to walk up to me tomorrow in the street I wouldn't have a clue who they are.

The above extract illustrates the barrier that not being able to speak isiZulu represented in terms of forming relationships with his biological family. In the next extract, we can see that isiZulu prevents the people at work from really experiencing him as he is. These are the same people who are instructing him on his Zulu culture, and so this inability to properly communicate is fairly significant.

R: Do you feel like the people at work have seen who you really are or do you think that they'd be surprised if they experienced you outside of work?

Paul: I think that they've got a strong hint of who I really am because I do have fun with them, when I can join in I do join in. I try and make them laugh, they try make me laugh, we all get along very well. So it's not far off, if I could speak Zulu they would be experiencing the same me.

In the next extract we can see how not speaking isiZulu meant that Paul lacked confidence to go and speak to some black pupils at school. In not speaking to them, he later realised that he was misperceived as arrogant. Thus, his inability to speak isiZulu significantly interfered with the development of a relationship with these boys and contributed to an inaccurate construction of who he was:

R: I think I've asked you if you ever find yourself in situations where you're feeling slightly uncomfortable. I'm thinking maybe in your work, where you didn't really know anyone or didn't really know what you were doing, if there were ever times where you just feel unsure of yourself?

Paul: Ya, there are times. What I used to do was, purely just to try and fit in, just make an effort. Because in my situation, I just think about it, when I first went to school not many of the black guys wanted anything to do with me and it was because I couldn't speak Zulu so I didn't go up to them or really greet them. I mean some of them thought I was just being arrogant.

Thus we can see that language played an important role in reducing Paul's capacity to form relationships with black peers, with his birth family as well as with his black co-workers who are currently schooling him in his black culture. These represent significant relationships that could have been instrumental in facilitating greater access to a black identity. The potential for these relationships to impact on his identity has therefore been considerably constrained because of language and the fact that he is unable to speak isiZulu. This issue was common to the remainder of the participants who did not speak isiZulu.

#### **4.8. Other identity domains evident in the data**

Although much attention has been to the identity domains of race and adoption, there were other, non-related subjectively experienced identities evident in the data. It would therefore be inaccurate to reduce the children in this sample to the narrow identity domains of race and adoption. Not only were other identity domains evident through the interviews with the participants, but one participant in particular articulated and engaged with this issue of being 'more than just' a transracially adopted person.

Lerato: You wanted to be my friend because of Lerato, you didn't want to be my friend because you found out that I was adopted. Cause if I didn't tell you that I was adopted then would you still be my friend or like, you know... do you see what I'm saying?

Lerato sees herself as somebody who is not just adopted. She has a greater sense of her identity than merely an adopted person and it is important to her that others see this too. The above extract illustrates that she wants to be valued for the personal qualities that she possesses that are unrelated to her adoption. In saying 'would you still be my friend if you didn't know I was adopted', one can see some of the anxiety that surrounds this issue for her. Particularly, one is able to witness her concern that others will reduce her to her adoptive status, and will only value

her for this aspect of herself. Thus, she is concerned that if she was not adopted, if she was just an 'ordinary' girl, then it is possible that other people would not want to be friends with her.

The other participants did not articulate a concern with this issue. However, not engaging overtly with the issue did not mean that it was not evident in the way that the participants spoke about themselves. Many of the participants would become particularly animated around specific topics that they were interested in. This increased animation and engagement seemed to point to activities and experiences of self that were particularly significant for each individual. Thabo became particularly engaged around the topic of motorbikes, and it was evident that the way he experienced himself in relation to this sport (self as risk-taker), was an important identity related issue for him at this stage of his life. Nancy identified herself as a bubbly, happy person, someone who likes to make others happy. This was an important aspect of her self definition. Having said this, increased engagement around certain aspects of self did not imply that there were not competing self positions in relation to these self positions. For example, in relation to motor biking, Thabo described himself as a risk taker, but simultaneously as someone who was also cautious and who knew his limitations. This was especially significant in relation to his friends, who were not as cautious as he was. Nancy felt that although she was a bubbly and happy person, there were times when she felt sad and could not make other people happy. This conflicting position was an awkward one for her and not one that she enjoyed occupying.

The above examples are merely two of the numerous illustrations that could have been presented with regards to this issue. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this research to exhaust all of the many identity related issues that arose in the data. However, the significance of this brief discussion lies in the fact that by engaging with the researcher around issues that were unrelated to their adoption, the participants in this sample presented themselves as having rich and complex repertoires of internal and external positions that consisted of, but were not limited to, adoption and race.

#### **4.9. Summary**

This results section highlights the complex nature of the identities of transracially adopted children in South Africa. The impact of these children's birth families has been discussed and the fact that negotiating two families was a very difficult task for the participants in this sample. In fact, the presence of birth families of these children resulted in a lot of ambivalence and contact was terminated. This ambivalence around birth families was also discussed in relation to the relative silence that surrounds the adoptive identity of some of the participants in this research. It was suggested that the inability to resolve the tension around birth families resulted in a silencing of their interior dialogue around their adoption. Where birth families were not known, the resulting conflict was also great, but seemed to have resulted in a greater degree of dialogue and engagement with the issue of adoptive identity. The children's encounters with racism were also discussed and the fact that stories of racism were noticeably absent for many of the participants. It was proposed that parents had played an important role in this regard as they had acted as barriers to exposure to racism. Where there was exposure to racism, this seemed to have had a large impact on informing the adoptive identity of the child. This adoptive identity was intimately connected, for one participant, with his experience of racism, and had had the effect of creating a sense of himself as socially credible as a result of being adopted. The children's subjective experience of race was also discussed. It was suggested that a child's ability or potential to explore their racial identity is severely constrained by the exposure that they have to black role models. In order to have an open dialogue between a black and a white identity, some form of guidance is needed and it was suggested that the children in this sample battled to engage in a dialogue with their black identity in the absence of such mentorship. Identity in these individuals is therefore not a simple construct. Rather, it is a dynamic construct that changes over time and across context, and is influenced by many mediating factors. Significant mediating factors that have arisen in this discussion include the impact of black role models on identity, the role of language in blocking access to black role models, the effect that racism has on identity, and the fact that parents are able to play a mediating role with both of these factors.

## **Chapter five**

### **Discussion**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

The conceptual and theoretical understanding of the identities of the participants discussed in the results chapter is not replicated in this discussion chapter as there is little existing literature with which to relate much of the results. The following chapter therefore builds on this conceptual understanding, and offers a more descriptive presentation of the results in relation to previous research outlined in the literature review. In providing a structure for this discussion, the three original research questions will be referred to. Firstly, this research aimed to describe the collection of internal and external positions that each participant occupied, especially in relation to the identity domains of adoption and race. Thus, this chapter starts with a discussion of adoptive identity and racial identity. The discussion will then explore other possible explanations for these research findings, including a problematisation of the findings in terms of whether they are unique to the phenomenon of transracial adoption, or whether they are typical of other populations, for example inracially adopted populations and non-adopted populations. Secondly, this research aimed to identify the ways in which the systems of relationships in which the participants were embedded impacted on their identities. Thus, the discussion will focus on the impact of parents as mediators and gate keepers on identity, as well as the effect that participants' relationships with their birth families and 'black mentors' have had on their identities. It is important to note that the separation of these first two research questions, although structurally useful, is in many ways an artificial separation. In terms of the theory of the dialogical self, relationships with others are experienced as aspects of the self, and thus there are instances where the discussion shifts between focusing on issues of identity and focusing on issues of relationship. Thirdly, this research sought to understand whether or not the participants occupied common internal and external positions within the self. This last question is not answered directly, but underlies many of the points within the discussion. Finally, the discussion will identify factors within the South African context that appear to uniquely impact on the identities of the participants of this research. Directions for future research will also be provided.

## **5.2. Adoptive identity**

The literature suggests that whether an adoption is open or closed may impact on the identities of adopted children (Frasch, Brooks, & Barth, 2000, in Frasch & Brooks, 2003). Open adoptions are those adoptions where the birth family is known to the adopted child, and closed adoptions are adoptions where the details of the birth family are unknown to the child (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler and Lash Esau, 2000). Thus, most of the adoptions in this sample would be considered open adoptions. Internationally there has been a change in preference for open adoptions as opposed to closed adoptions as it has been speculated that open adoptions result in less identity-related conflict. It has been argued that the reason for this is that children in open adoptions do not have to deal with confusion with regards to their “biological heritage” (Frasch & Brooks, 2003, p. 206).

The results of this research partially support this finding. It was suggested that the children in this sample who had contact with their birth families appeared to have engaged little with their adoptive identities. Thus, one could argue that because of this contact with birth families, they had less conflict-ridden adoptive identities and there was therefore little with which to engage. This may have caused them to be relatively silent in relation to their adoptive identities. In contrast, the participant who did not know anything about her birth family experienced much conflict with regards to her adoptive identity. Thus, one might argue that not knowing her ‘biological heritage’ resulted in a great degree of identity-related confusion.

However, the results could also be interpreted differently, and it is felt that there were other possible explanations for the dynamics that were causing this silence. Firstly, it was speculated that these children felt lucky to have been adopted. It was argued that the power of this subjective identity (self-as-lucky) was causing more conflicting identities (such as a possible self-as-angry) to be silenced. This is not an issue that has been raised in the literature, and it is possible that in South Africa, where race and class have historically been organised along similar lines, the socio-economic differences between adoptive families and birth families in this sample was more exaggerated than in places such as Britain and America. Thus, it is possible that this position of being lucky is one that is relatively unique to South Africa. The second argument was

that these children had great difficulty negotiating their adoptive family and their birth family. It was suggested that this task of negotiation was made particularly difficult due to the extreme differences between their own circumstances within their adoptive family, and the contrasting circumstances of their birth family. It has already been suggested that the extent of this difference is perhaps unique to the South Africa context. It was therefore felt that for the children in this sample, engaging with an adoptive identity was a task that would involve engaging with the issue of having two very different families as well as overcoming the powerful position of self-as-lucky and exploring more negative thoughts and feelings regarding their adoption. The silence around their adoptive identity could therefore be a result of their difficulty with this task.

Negotiating relationships with birth families and adopted families is a task that is common to all adopted children, whether they are adopted transracially or inracially. However, the transracially adopted children in this sample appear to have the difficult task of negotiating two families who are very culturally, linguistically and socio-economically different to each other. In combination, these differences appear to increase the complexity of this task of negotiation and it seems that where birth parents are known and contact is possible, these children have been unable to find a way to accommodate both of their families. In these cases, the external position of birth family created too much ambivalence between internal positions (for example, the positions of self-as-privileged and self-as-outsider), and the result has been a distancing from their birth families in order to simplify their internal world. Although it was not expressed, one might speculate that this choice to distance themselves from their birth families might come at a cost to the children in this sample in terms of the possible guilt they may experience over this decision.

It appears that much of the responsibility for negotiating the relationship with their birth families was left to the children, as the adoptive parents in this sample felt that their children should choose whether or not they wanted contact with their birth families. Whilst this was respectful of the child's wishes, it seems to have created a situation that was overwhelming for the children, and suggests that this responsibility was not appropriate for the children, given their young age at the time (approximately aged 6 to 9). Thus, it is possible that the children in this sample may have coped better if there had been greater communication between adopted parents and birth parents, and if most of the decision-making with regards to contact with birth parents had been



done by the parents and not the children. In this way, any possible guilt for cutting off contact with birth families may have been avoided. Thus, the results of this research suggest that open adoptions *per se* do not result in a less complex process of identity development. Rather, the results from this research support previous findings that argue that parental collaboration between birth parents and adoptive parents is important. Grotevant et. al. (2000) argue that where there is an open adoption, the way in which the two sets of parents collaborate with each other is very important. This kind of collaboration has been likened to divorce scenarios, where it has been found that children cope with divorce better when parents communicate with each other in the best interests of the child (Grotevant et. al., 2000). The focus is therefore on the parents, and the responsibility that they have to negotiate some of the difficult dynamics that arise when two sets of parents are involved in a child's life. Thus, it would appear that an important factor in determining the degree to which these children experience identity related conflict is the extent to which the child is left to negotiate these relationships on their own, and the degree to which decision-making is done by the parents.

It was argued in the results section that both contact with the birth family, as well as no contact with birth family gave rise to internal positions that were unequal in power. Where positions were unequal in power it was argued that the less dominant position became silenced. This dynamic could be seen for example in the case of Lerato, where she shifted between wanting to know the answers to her adoption-related questions, and being afraid of what the answers might be. In her case, her self position characterized by fear was more powerful than her questioning position, and so dialogue between these two positions became constrained. The literature on the dialogical self argues that identity may become problematic when this occurs (Hermans, 2003). It has already been suggested that parents have an important role to play in mediating their child's adoptive identity. Specifically, it has been argued that they have an important role to play in reducing guilt by assuming responsibility for important decisions. Hermans (2003) suggests that one might have to intervene with an individual when the dialogical potential of that individual's repertoire of internal and external positions becomes constrained. This intervention can be done by a psychologist, who would aim to start engaging in a dialogue with the child and by doing so, increase dialogue between competing positions. However, it is also possible that this can be done by parents in a preventative manner, in order to reduce the likelihood of

reaching a point where professional intervention is necessary. As such, this highlights the important role that parents can play in keeping adoption-related dialogue with their adopted child open and honest. This is an issue that is supported by the literature, and it is argued that openness of communication is an important predictor of adjustment in children who are adopted (Rosenthal, 1993; Hoopes, 1990 in Grotevant et. al., 2003).

### **5.3. Racial identity**

Racial identity is a prominent issue in the literature with regards to transracially adopted children. A significant proportion of the literature on transracial adoption is either concerned with the issue of adjustment in transracially adopted children (McCroy and Zurcher, 1983; Feigelman and Silverman, 1984; Simon and Alstein, 1987, in Bagley, 1993; Gill & Jackson, 1983, in Bagley, 1993; Bagley, 1993; Shireman and Johnson, 1986, in Alexander & Curtis, 1996; Vroegh, 1997;), or with the issue of racial identity in transracially adopted children (Bagley, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1997; Soon Huh & Reid, 2000; Bradley & Hawkins-Leon, 2002). One of the main aims of this research was to understand the way in which racial identity in transracially adopted children has been problematised in the literature, and to gain a rich description of the racial identities of the children involved in this sample. It was hoped that this combined understanding would facilitate a greater depth of knowledge regarding the racial identities of transracially adopted children.

The literature seems to suggest that transracially adopted children may grow up with 'confused' racial identities (Feigelman, 2000). It has been argued that this assumption is based on a traditional, Eriksonian conception of identity whereby coherence and integration of identity mark successful and positive states of identity. This is assumed to be problematic. However, identity is a more complex construct than this, and that it may be possible for individuals to have multiple and even competing identities, and still be psychologically healthy. This applies to many domains of identity, including race. This theoretical normalisation of conflicting identities seems appropriate in relation to the identities of transracially adopted children. The complex nature of identity development in these children (Frasch & Brooks, 2003), means that it is unlikely that they would have simple and integrated racial identities. Thus, to only understand them from a

theoretical perspective which pathologizes conflicting identities would be to pathologize what is presumably a relatively normal experience amongst this particular population of individuals. In addition, the fact that research has shown that most of these children are able to achieve good levels of adjustment suggests that a confused or conflicted racial identity is not necessarily problematic. This kind of questioning was consistent with the more contemporary theory of identity of the dialogical self, hence this theory becoming the framework for understanding the racial identities of the transracially adopted children in this study.

The results of this research show that all of the children in this study have what could be labelled 'confused' racial identities. That is, all of the children in this study shifted between a black identity and a white identity, and none of them had committed themselves to a racial identity that was either black or white. It was also found that the degree to which they positioned themselves as black and white varied. Three of the participants experienced themselves for the most part as white, and occasionally shifted to identifying themselves as black. One of the participants identified herself as black, but also shifted to occasionally experiencing herself as white. It was argued that these differing experiences were mediated by exposure to black culture as well as access to black role models who could engage the transracially adopted children in a dialogue with a meaningful black racial identity.

This finding, that transracially adopted have 'confused' racial identities, is consistent with the findings in the literature. The huge debate in the literature however, is whether or not this is problematic. Much of the literature argues that having confused racial identities jeopardises the child's overall sense of identity and makes them vulnerable to the effects of racism. The other side of the debate is that transracially adopted children generally show good levels of adjustment, and so perhaps a strong racial identity is not crucial to overall adjustment. This particular research did not measure indicators of adjustment, and thus no comment on the relationship between racial identity and other indicators of adjustment such as self esteem is possible. However, in engaging with the issue of whether or not the children in this study were experiencing racial identities that were problematic, it was useful to turn to the theory of the dialogical self on which this research was based, and to understand identity-related pathology from a dialogical perspective.

It has already been argued that the theory of the dialogical self speculates that individuals may experience problems with their identity when the dialogical potential of the system is reduced. Thus, when certain internal or external positions within the self become overly powerful, they may silence other, competing positions within the self (Hermans, 2003). The results of this research suggest that when identity related problems are conceptualised in this manner, some of the participants in the sample may be experiencing difficulties with their racial identity. Two of the participants in the sample had grown up with racial identities based on identification with their adoptive race. Thus, they identified themselves as white, and this racial position within the self was very strong. In these cases, there was little engagement or dialogue with a black identity. Thus, from a dialogical perspective, their internal position of white was very strong, and the dialogical potential of their racial identity was reduced. The question that was then asked was: is this problematic?

The answer is probably yes. In answering this question, it was speculated that this 'white' racial identity was fairly fragile and perhaps only possible because there had been little dialogue with a competing, black, identity. When dialogue with a competing identity was eventually initiated, a change in the racial identity was necessitated. This process of change was potentially very anxiety provoking. For the children in this sample, the initiation of a dialogue with a competing racial identity was done at a fairly advanced age, by people outside of the child's family. Nancy had been teased by girls at school and through this teasing had started to question her racial identity. Paul had left school and had come into contact with work colleagues who had started to instruct him on his black culture. Thus, these children had finally entered into a dialogue with another racial identity. This is likely to happen in varying forms, to most transracially adopted children, at some stage of their lives. It would be naïve to believe that they could grow up with a fairly uncomplicated racial identity based on identification with their adoptive race. Thus, from the experiences of the children in this sample, it appears that where racial positions within the self system are silenced by more powerful positions, this situation cannot be maintained indefinitely. Again, the question is whether or not this was necessarily problematic?

The answer is both yes and no. From the experiences of the children in this sample it seems that it is not necessarily problematic. Paul had initiated a dialogue with his black racial identity in a

gentle and supportive manner, and had enjoyed this process. Nancy on the other hand had engaged in this dialogue in a traumatic way, through being teased by girls at school who caused her to question her previously held beliefs about herself and her identity. She started asking questions about her racial identity and experienced this questioning as frightening and anxiety provoking. Significantly, she was only able to engage in an internal dialogue regarding her racial identity. In contrast, Paul was able to engage both with an internal dialogue as well as a dialogue with other black people who were able to mentor him through this process. In contrast to these two participants, Lerato had engaged with this dialogue early on in life, and had received much support and mentorship from other black people. Importantly, she was able to shift between internal positions of race with ease and flexibility.

The above discussion suggests that it is not ideal for transracially adopted children to develop racial identities based solely on identification with their adoptive race, with little dialogue with a black identity. This is a fragile racial identity and not one that can be maintained. However, the resolution of this picture need not be problematic and may be done with little distress to the individual. Specifically, although the theory of the dialogical self speculates that problems occur when positions are silenced due to overly powerful positions, it is possible that in relation to racial identity in transracially adopted children, this is more problematic if dialogue between positions is eventually initiated in a traumatic manner.

Another issue in relation to racial identity seems to be important. In the case of Lerato, it has been argued that early relationships with black 'mentors' enabled an early initiation of a dialogue with a black identity. It was suggested that because of this, she experienced competing racial identities between which she was able to move flexibly, with little associated emotional conflict. However, it was also suggested that in her case, her dialogue with a black racial identity had been conducted outside of her adoptive family, that it had been an individual journey, as opposed to a family journey. It was felt that this had caused a cultural divide within the family and had increased conflict between herself and her adoptive parents. Hayes (1993) argues that parents of transracially adopted children have the difficult task of celebrating the differences between themselves and their children whilst at the same time ensuring a sense of belonging within the family. It is important to acknowledge this challenge, as all the parents of the children involved

in this research had done the best that they knew how for their children. However, it is possible that reframing the development of a black racial identity in the transracially adopted child as a family journey as opposed to an individual journey, would enhance the child's sense of belonging within the adoptive family. This is an issue which is supported by previous research (Friedlander et. al., 2000) which suggests that transracially adopted children feel less isolated within the adopted family when the family as a whole is constructed as a multicultural family.

#### **5.4. The salience of identity related issues**

Much attention within the results of this research has been paid to a comparison of the participants with regards to the identity-related issues of adoption and race. Through this process of comparison, it has been suggested that one of the participants engaged with the issues of adoption and race more than the other participants. Possible reasons for this have been discussed. However, an issue that is addressed in the literature on identity is the issue of salience. Hermans (2003) argues that internal and external positions within the self will change in salience over time and across different contexts. Gregg (1991 in Hermans, 2003) refers to the concept of the innovation of the self, which is the capacity of the self to change over time. Similarly, Grotevant et. al. (2000) argue that adopted adolescents seem to experience varying salience of their adoptive identity. In addition, some theories of racial identity have been criticized for not accommodating the issue of salience, arguing that racial identity will be more important for some individuals than others (Cross et. al., 1999 in Frasch & Brooks, 2003). Thus, it is possible to view the results of this research from the issue of salience. That is, the difference in the experiences of the participants could simply be that they differ in the degree to which identity related domains are important to them. Significantly, the research suggests that this may be a normal and appropriate phenomenon.

#### **5.5. Adolescence as a time of separation and searching**

Another way in which some of the research findings may be problematised is the degree to which some of the experiences and attitudes of the participants are normal when compared to other populations. Thus, in some cases the results of this research can be questioned in terms of

comparison with normal, non-adopted populations i.e. is this a normal, adolescent experience, or is this unique to the experience of transracial adoption? In addition, some of the results can be questioned in relation to adoption generally i.e. is this something unique to transracial adoption, or is it something that all adopted children experience? It is difficult to answer these questions and there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which the experiences of this sample are unique to transracial adoption, and to what extent some of the experiences are fairly normal processes that are experienced by other populations. In addition, it is difficult to define what is meant by 'normal'. One could refer to more traditional theories of development (for example, Erikson) but it would not be consistent with the theoretical framework of this research to do this. The theory of the dialogical self does not offer a solid developmental perspective, and it is therefore difficult to offer an explanation that is theoretically appropriate. Nevertheless, the case of Lerato was discussed in relation to the fact that the way in which her parents approached the formation of her racial identity created a cultural divide within the family. This division seemed to manifest in a great degree of conflict between Lerato and her adoptive parents, as she often felt misunderstood by them. However, this may also be a fairly normal adolescent experience and it is possible that Lerato's experience was a normal adolescent process, the expression of which was coloured by her experience of transracial adoption.

## **5.6. Attachment**

The issue of attachment suggests that children who are adopted at a young age (before the age of six months) are able to compensate for the break in attachment (from their birth mother) that they experience, and are able to re-attach with no problems (Juffer & Rosenboom, 1997). Problems with attachment can be evidenced by the problems that children may have in forming relationships later on in life (Howe, 2001). Another important issue in the attachment literature is that the pre-adoptive experiences of the children are important and may affect later adjustment. Issues of attachment were not addressed directly in the interviews and there is no direct data from this study related to them. However, it is possible to speculate on how issues of attachment may have affected the participants of this research. In this sample the children differed with respect to the ages at which they were adopted and they had generally positive pre-adoptive experiences. The one exception was Lerato, who was found in a state of severe neglect. The

details of her pre-adoptive experience are not fully known, but it is assumed that the state of neglect in which she was found had characterized her experience from birth. Lerato is also the participant who is currently experiencing the greatest degree of conflict with her adoptive parents; this has been explained by referring to her cultural dissimilarity to her adoptive family, as well as by arguing that this could be a fairly normal adolescent phenomenon. However, it is also possible to understand her current experience from an attachment perspective. This perspective would argue that her pre-adoptive experiences as well as her advanced age at adoption have put her at risk for problems with attachment. These attachment problems could be affecting her present relationship with her adoptive parents.

### **5.7. Parents as mediators and gatekeepers to identity**

The literature suggests that parents of transracially adopted children seem to respond to their children in two qualitatively different ways (Cole, 1992 in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000). In the first instance, parents may celebrate their child's birth culture, emphasising the differences between themselves and their child. Such parents are more likely to live in mixed race neighbourhoods and are more likely to socialise with people of different race groups. In the second instance, parents may choose to emphasize the ways in which their transracially adopted child is similar to them, and may tend to downplay the differences that exist between them. Research seems to suggest that the first scenario is preferable, and that transracially adopted children achieve more positive racial identities under circumstances where their birth culture is embraced (Cole, 1992 in Soon Huh & Reid, 2000). Thus, research seems to show that the way parents respond, including the exposure they provide to people of the same race as their child, is integral to fostering a positive racial identity in transracially adopted children.

The results from this research support this finding. The results suggest that without much contact with their birth culture, transracially adopted children may develop a reasonably simple and unconfused racial identity based on identification with their adoptive culture. However, it has been argued that at some point in time, a transracially adopted child is likely to start engaging with a racial identity associated with their birth culture. This may be done spontaneously, or it may be done because other members of society may force it upon the child. This is a potentially



anxiety-provoking experience, particularly if it is done in the absence of guidance. Thus, one might surmise that the circumstance in which a child initiates a dialogue with the racial identity associated with their birth culture is important. In this respect, parents are able to play an important role in terms of providing, or facilitating access to, black role models. Black role models could play an important role in mentoring this process and in providing a dialogue with a racial identity that is based on positive and meaningful constructions of what it means to be black. It is perhaps also important for parents to go further than merely providing access to black role models and black culture. The results of this research indicate that this process of constructing a black identity needs to be done within the context of the adoptive family and should not be done in isolation from them. What the child learns about his or her racial identity, the adoptive family should too. If this is not done, the family runs the risk of distancing themselves from their transracially adopted child and of creating a cultural divide within the family. However, this is a potentially daunting task for any family adopting transracially. In fact, it is possible that families who do not embrace their child's racial identity, and who prefer to de-emphasise the differences between themselves and their child, may do so partially because they are not sure how to do otherwise.

Vonk (2001) refers to several ways in which parents of transracially adopted children may become culturally competent in order to better facilitate the development of a positive racial identity in their adopted children. One of the components of cultural competence is 'racial awareness', which is the process of reflecting on one's assumptions regarding race, thereby becoming more aware of one's own racial prejudices but also the ways in which race structures society and impacts on the experiences of individuals from minority groups. It is suggested that this kind of racial awareness is of particular significance in the South African context where race relations have historically been fraught, and where issues of race affect almost every facet of society. Race has structured South African society and still consciously and unconsciously, structures and organises many interpersonal dynamics between individuals and groups in South Africa. The danger in South Africa is that racism may have become so embedded in parents' consciousness that they may be unaware of how their thoughts around race affect the way in which they may relate to their child. In the case of Nancy, her adoptive parents used many derogatory terms for black people in South Africa during the course of the interviews. Although

this was done with humour, one can't help but wonder the degree to which Nancy internalised this negative perception of her race. In the case of Thabo, whilst he recounted many stories of his encounters with racism, his father felt that Thabo's race had not really been an issue and Thabo appeared more sensitive to racism than his father was. In both of these cases, the parents' lack of sensitivity to race and their use of humour in this regard meant that their children's dominant exposure to a black racial identity was one constructed around humour and racism. Although these parents did this with the best of intentions, a racial identity based on humour and racism is not a strong foundation upon which their children might build a positive racial identity. Thus, it can be seen that the issue of racial awareness raised by Vonk (2001) is particularly appropriate and relevant in the South African context.

### **5.8. Coping mechanisms for racism**

It has already been suggested by American and British research that an important issue in the literature on transracial adoption concerns whether or not parents of transracially adopted children are able to socialize their children in a manner that fosters the development of coping skills (Hollingsworth, 1997). Black children in South Africa are not in the minority but race has structured South African society for many years, and racism is a reality in South Africa. If coping mechanisms for racism have been a concern in America and Britain, it would be relevant and appropriate to extend this concern to the South African context. Unfortunately, the issue of coping mechanisms for racism was not explored directly with the participants, and thus there is no direct or focused data relating to this issue. However, the issue of racism did emerge spontaneously during the interviews, and it is possible to make one or two comments in this regard.

It has been suggested that some of the parents in this sample attempted to shield their children from racism. Thus, rather than instilling their children with their own coping mechanisms, they attempted to protect their children from any racism they might experience. It is difficult to know how this impacted on the children, as the children of these parents did not raise the issue of racism during the course of their interviews. This may or may not be significant. It is possible that because these children had been protected from racism, they did not raise the issue of racism

because it had not been a significant experience for them. However, there could be other reasons why they did not raise this as an issue, including the fact that it was not directly referred to by the researcher. One of the children did raise racism as an issue. He told several stories of his encounters with racism, and felt that he was generally treated better when people realized he was associated with a white family. Thus, he was granted respect by virtue of his adoptive family, and not because of any inherent qualities that he might possess. It is uncertain how this affected his identity, although it made him aware of the privilege associated with being white, which he was not. In terms of coping with racism, he appeared to have a very passive response to racism, which was to walk away from it.

The parents in this sample did not appear to actively socialize their children to cope with racism. Rather, they took the responsibility upon themselves for shielding their children from racism. One can speculate that this might leave the children without the coping skills that they might need in order to deal with racism. In addition, the result of not coping with racism is that children might internalize the negative messages that they receive with regards to race. Thus, the impact that this might have on their racial identity is both negative and significant, although this remains at the level of speculation.

### **5.9. Issues specific to the South African context**

It has already been argued that transracially adopted children in South Africa face issues that are unique to the South African context. Specifically, the complexity of the South African context can be seen in the vast socio-economic differences between the adoptive families and the birth families in this sample. In South Africa, race and class have historically been organized along similar lines, and so one can anticipate that the socio-economic differences evident in this sample will be replicated in many other families who have adopted transracially. In addition, many of the adoptive parents in this sample had adopted the children of their domestic workers. It has been argued that parental collaboration between birth families and adoptive families is important, and one wonders how the power dynamics inherent in employer-employee relationships may have reduced the capacity for collaboration between these parents. Related to this, none of the families in this sample had intentionally sought to adopt their children, a scenario that seems

fairly unique to the South African situation and not one that has been addressed in any of the international literature on transracial adoption. It is likely that this may also impact on the identities of the children in this sample.

Lastly, the results of this research suggest that in South Africa, language can be a barrier to racial identity formation for children adopted transracially. All but one of the participants in this sample could not speak isiZulu. This seemed to be a significant obstacle in terms of forming various relationships, including relationships with birth families, relationships with peers and relationships with work colleagues. It was suggested that access to these relationships can play an important role in facilitating a dialogue with a black identity, a dialogue that is difficult (although not impossible) for white adoptive parents to do. Thus, an inability to access these relationships impacts on identity by preventing dialogue around identity relevant issues. In the absence of research on transracial adoption in South Africa it is difficult to comment on this aspect of the findings within the context of other research. However, it is speculated that this will be a common experience of transracially adopted children for two reasons. The first is that in South Africa there are eleven official languages, and although English is widely spoken there are many people who do not speak English. Thus, language acts as a barrier to forming relationships for many people in South Africa, not only transracially adopted children. The significance of this phenomenon in relation to transracially adopted children however, is the way in which it impacts on identity. The second reason is that it is very difficult for parents to raise bilingual children if they are not bilingual themselves. It is unlikely that there are many white, English speaking parents of transracially adopted children whose children are fluent in an indigenous language. This is an issue that is possibly common to many transracially adopted children in South Africa and not one with an easy solution.

#### **5.10. The theory of the dialogical self**

It has been argued that the theory of the dialogical self accommodates several criticisms of more traditional theories of identity. One such criticism is that traditional theories of identity have not adequately taken into account the impact that other people, both as individuals and groups, have, on the process of identity formation. Thus, identity development has largely been seen as an

intrapsychic process. The theory of the dialogical self specifically addresses the role of others on identity development through the concept of external positions within the self, and in doing so avoids the tendency towards reductionism typical of more traditional conceptions of identity. To what extent do the results of this research support this theoretical assumption? If one were to assume that identity development is a more intrapsychic process than an interpersonal process, then one would expect identity formation to occur fairly automatically, resulting in fairly consistent identities across a number of people. Thus, one would anticipate that the children in this sample would have fairly similar identities. By examining identity domains such as race and adoption one can see that this is not the case. By analyzing both internal and external positions within the self, the impact that relationships with others have had on the identities of the participants has been described. Specifically, different styles of parenting, and differing relationships with significant people (such as birth families), have impacted significantly on the identities of the children, suggesting that identity development is indeed both an intrapsychic and interpersonal process. The results of this research therefore lend support to the theoretical premise of the theory of the dialogical self. Importantly, by using the theory of the dialogical self, this particular research study has gained a wholistic and complex understanding of the identities of the participants.

Another criticism of traditional theories of identity is that they pathologise identities that lack coherence and integration. It has been argued that the theory of the dialogical self accommodates this criticism, celebrating identities that are characterized by difference, and even conflict. According to the theory of the dialogical self, identity related problems do not occur through a lack of integration, but through a dramatic difference in the power of subjectively experienced identities. Thus, the capacity for dialogue between conflicting positions within the self is a sign of psychological health rather than the capacity for these positions to be subjectively experienced as similar. The case of transracially adopted children offers a good opportunity to evaluate this assertion as transracially adopted children face the task of integrating two opposing racial identities. This identity domain is not as subtle as other aspects of identity, and therefore offers a more obvious opportunity for the evaluation of this theoretical assumption. However, in assessing the relative 'health' of identity, traditional approaches to identity have measured psychological constructs such as self esteem. Thus, for example, it has been found that children

with coherent personal identities have better levels of self esteem. This research did not measure psychological constructs, and therefore there is no obvious basis upon which to evaluate the relative health of the identities of the participants. The racial identities of the participants have already been discussed, and it has been suggested that transracially adopted children will not develop coherent racial identities, but will probably experience shifting racial identities. It has been argued that it is important for there to be dialogue between racial identities, or transracially adopted children risk experiencing anxiety around their racial identities. In addition, it has been argued that these children cannot engage in a dialogue with their racial identity on their own, and that they need guidance in doing this. Thus, in relation to racial identity in transracially adopted children, the results of this research suggest that the capacity for dialogue is indeed more significant than the capacity for coherence.

#### **5.11. Limitations and directions for future research**

There are several limitations inherent in this research. These limitations restrict the degree to which the results of this research may be generalised to other transracially adopted children, and therefore need to be taken into account. These limitations also provide important directions for future research.

One of the limitations of this research is that no comparison groups were used. The absence of samples from these other populations makes it difficult to answer questions relating to whether the experiences of this sample are unique to transracial adoption, or whether they are conflicts characteristic of other populations, for example inracially adopted populations and non-adopted populations. However, this limitation also raises directions for future research. Past research into transracial adoption has involved the comparison of transracially adopted children with children adopted inracially as well as non-adopted children. This is therefore not a new suggestion. However, the particular design of this research combined with the theoretical framework that was used enabled a good understanding of the complexities inherent in the identities of transracially adopted children in the South African context. Thus, the replication of this research using a comparative research design would answer some of the questions that have been raised in this discussion.

There are several features of the demographics of this sample that are worthy of comment. None of the parents initiated the adoption of the children in this sample, and each adoption started as a fairly informal arrangement that later became permanent. Unintentional adoptions have not been addressed in the literature, and thus one can only speculate on the impact that this might have on the adopted children in this sample. In addition, over-represented in this very small sample is a scenario where the children of domestic workers were adopted by their employees. These particular features of this sample raise several questions: Were there power dynamics existing between the birth parents and the adoptive parents as a result of their employer/ employee relationship? If so, have these affected the children? How? Has it affected the relationship that they have with their birth family? If so, how? How are children affected when parents do not intentionally initiate the adoption? For example, is bonding and attachment affected? Are unintentional adoptions unique to the South African context? What proportion of transracially adopted children in South Africa has been adopted under these circumstances? These are questions that have not been answered by this research. However, they are felt to be important issues that could uniquely impact on the identities of the transracially adopted children in this sample and could provide directions for future research.

It was earlier suggested that engagement with a black identity is an inevitable process for transracially adopted children, especially in South Africa. This is not an assumption that has been proven within the context of this research, and it would be useful for further research to explore this issue. Thus, future research could investigate such questions as: is engagement with a black identity an inevitable process in transracially adopted children in South Africa? If engagement with a black identity is inevitable, then it has been suggested that the way in which this engagement is initiated is important. The age at which this is done, the manner in which it is done and the relationship of the person who does it with the child seem to be important. How significant are these factors?

Exploring the issue of racism directly would also be a useful area of inquiry for future research. Specifically, questions to be asked might include: what are the effects on identity of not equipping transracially adopted children with coping mechanisms for racism? What is the extent

of racist encounters that transracially adopted children in South Africa face? How do these encounters impact on the identities of these children?

Lastly, future engagement with this research issue could include an analysis of the broader influences on identity formation, including the social, cultural, historical and even ideological basis of identity formation. This is especially relevant in the South African context, but was beyond the scope of this particular study.

As illustrated, this research raises many unanswered questions, providing several suggestions for future research. Given that the South African context is a unique and complex one, it is important that future research be South African based, in order to appropriately answer these questions.

## **5.12. Summary**

The above discussion highlights the complex nature of identity development in transracially adopted children in South Africa. Contextual issues specific to the South African situation have been discussed, including the impact of language and poverty issues on identity. The circumstances surrounding the adoptions of this sample are also unique, and it has been argued that there may be a particular impact of 'unintended' adoptions on identity. Significantly, the socioeconomic, language and cultural differences between adoptive families and birth families have created conflicting positions within the self that are experienced as anxiety provoking. In managing this anxiety, many of the participants in this sample have cut off contact with their birth families. It has been argued that adoptive and biological parents should collaboratively assume more responsibility for this level of decision making. The data appeared to suggest that many of the children in this sample had engaged little with their adoptive identity. Possible explanations for this finding have been explored, including the positioning of the participants as being lucky, silencing more negative engagement with an adoptive identity.

In terms of racial identity, the children in this sample display conflicting racial identities that appear to be mediated by access, and exposure, to black culture. Parents play an important role in creating or denying this access, and thus it has been argued that parents may act as gatekeepers to



the racial identity of their transracially adopted children. It has also been argued that a racial identity based purely on identification with the adoptive race is fragile and not easily sustainable, and the manner in which children start engaging in a racial identity based on their birth race is important. Relationships with various role players, such as peers, colleagues and black 'role models' may assist and guide transracially adopted children in initiating this dialogue with their racial identity. This finding has highlighted the appropriateness of framing psychological health in terms of the dialogical potential of the identity system.

Lastly, this discussion has explored other possible explanations for the findings, including attachment issues, and the fact that identities may differ in salience across many identity domains. In addition, adolescence is a time of separation from parents and searching for identity and thus some of the conflict evident in the data may be part of this developmental picture. Building on issues raised in the discussion, several directions for future research have been suggested.

## **Chapter six**

### **Conclusion**

The stated aims of this research were three-fold. Firstly, the study aimed to describe the collection of internal and external positions that each transracially adopted child in the sample occupied, especially in relation to the identity relevant domains of adoption and race. Secondly, the study aimed to understand how the systems of relationships in which the children operated, affected their identity. Lastly, the study sought to outline whether or not there was a commonality of positions that the participants occupied. In describing the identities of the transracially adopted children in this sample, the theory of the dialogical self was used. It was felt that this theory could accommodate the complexities and contradictions inherent in the identities of these transracially adopted individuals and it was argued that a more traditional approach to identity, such as one based on the work of Erikson, would not capture the richness or depth of these identities.

Although this research did not fully explore the many identity domains evident in the data, it was shown that the participants evidenced many identity domains, including but not limited to, the domains of race and adoption. Thus, it would be inaccurate to reduce the participants merely to race and adoption, and the full richness and complexity of their identities must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the results of this research suggest that the racial and adoptive identities of the children in this sample are indeed fraught with contradictions and complexities. In addition, it was shown that the relationships that these children have with such people as their adoptive families, birth families, peers, work colleagues and what was termed 'black mentors', all had a significant impact on the identities of these children. Thus, it is felt that the theory of the dialogical self aptly captured the way in which the systems of relationships in which these children are involved, impact on identity. A traditional conception of identity would not have facilitated this depth of understanding, and may have overlooked the significance of these relationships.

The results of this research also suggest that the participants in this sample did occupy common internal and external positions of the self. In relation to the identity domain of race, the majority



of the sample identified with their adoptive race, and had engaged little with a racial identity based on their birth race. In this regard it was argued that some engagement with a racial identity based on birth race is inevitable, and that the way in which this is done is more important than when it is done. Importantly, it appears best if this discussion is initiated in an age appropriate way by parents, rather than in a more traumatic way by individuals outside of the family system. This is an issue that should be included when educating potential adoptive parents of transracially adopted children. Some of the participants had constructed racial identities based on humour, on making other people laugh. For example, in relation to race they occupied positions of self-as-joke and self-as-physically different and prominent. It is suggested that these constructions do not reflect rich or meaningful constructions of race, and are in fact more echoes of the voices of others than deeply held positions within the self. Thus, it is possible that internal positions within the self may differ in terms of their 'embeddedness' within the individual. Significantly, in relation to adoptive identity, it was argued that a sense of being lucky was a powerful and common experience of the children in this sample. Importantly, the power of this position seemed to silence more negative, competing positions, and the notion of the self as hierarchically organised was supported.

In addition to providing a description of the identities of the participants, the results of this research also provide further insight into the dynamic relationship between internal and external positions within the self. Significantly, the presence or absence of contact with birth families appeared to represent a significant external position within the identities of the participants, creating many corresponding internal positions, including internal positions of self-as-stranger, as-privileged, as-superior, as-questioning, as-afraid, as-unknown and as-missing. It was seen that where internal positions were experienced as anxiety provoking, the participants tended to cut off contact with external positions that were causing the discomfort. Thus, the link between internal and external positions, and the corresponding impact of relationships on individual identity, was highlighted. In addition, the results of this research draw attention to the dialogical nature of individual identity, and the capacity for individuals to maintain the integrity of their identity through dialogue between opposing positions within the self. This was seen for example, in the case of Lerato, who was able to accommodate both white and black cultural practices through the mechanism of dialogue.

This research was conducted on an issue that has previously been under-researched in South Africa. The results of this research suggest that several factors unique to the South Africa context are significant in terms of the ways in which they impacted on the identities of the transracially adopted children in this sample. Firstly, major socio-economic and cultural differences between the children in this sample, and their birth families impacted on their identities by creating internal positions within the self that were experienced as anxiety-provoking and difficult to negotiate. As a consequence, relationships with birth families were terminated. Secondly, the impact that language had on the potential of the children in this sample to form relationships with individuals from their birth culture in turn had an effect on the development of their racial identity. In addition, it was speculated that the phenomena of parents adopting children without proactively seeking to adopt may be fairly unique to the South African situation, as are situations where children are adopted by the employers of their birth parents. These issues should be considered in relation to policy development in South Africa. For example the trend in this particular sample seemed to be toward informal arrangements between adoptive families and birth families, which later became formal adoptions. These informal arrangements appeared to cause confusion regarding how the relationship between the birth family and the adopted family should proceed, with very little framework for deciding on the degree and nature of contact between the adopted children and their birth families. It is possible that informal arrangements should be made formal as quickly as possible and that through this process of formal adoption, more structured mediation between adopted families and birth families could take place. Structured mediation could involve consultation with social workers during the adoption process in order to help both birth parents and adoptive parents to make informed decisions regarding the contact that is maintained between the two families. In this way, decisions are not made by the child, but are made in a knowledgeable and assisted manner by both sets of parents.

Lastly, there were several limitations to this research. It is important to bear these in mind and to be cautious when generalising these results to other transracially adopted children in South Africa. In addition, the conceptual framework on which this research was based conceptually discourages the reification of the results of this research, and emphasises the dynamic and therefore changing, nature of identity.

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## Appendix A

### Information Sheet: Children

Thank you for considering participating in my research.

#### Who am I?

My name is Robynne Thomson and I am currently in the second year of my master's degree in clinical psychology. In order to qualify as a psychologist I have to write a thesis. A thesis is essentially research that I conduct. After I have done my research I write up my findings, linking them to what has already been learnt about the issue that I am studying. My thesis is supervised by a lecturer at the University of Kwazulu Natal.

#### What am I studying?

I am interested in children who have been transracially adopted. That is, children who have been adopted by parents who are of a different race group from themselves. I am interested in finding out how transracially adopted children think and feel about themselves. I would like to know about the kinds of identity issues that transracially adopted children experience.

#### How will I do this?

I would like to conduct three interviews with each individual who has been transracially adopted and agrees to participate in my research. In this way, we will get a chance to know each other and will have time to talk about all the things that we would like to talk about. It also gives you and me a chance to go away and think about things, and to ask questions or change some of our previous responses if we would like to. Each time we meet we will probably spend approximately half an hour together. During the interview, I will tape (onto an audiotape) our conversation. Afterwards, I will transcribe these conversations. This means that I will type the conversations onto a computer, so that I can read what we said.

In addition to meeting with you, I would also like meet once with your parents to ask them some questions. I will be asking them how they have responded to you, as a transracially adopted child. Your parents will also be able to choose a pseudonym and this interview will also be taped and transcribed.

#### Are there risks to participating in my research?

Possibly. Although it is unlikely, you may find that talking about yourself and your experiences could be upsetting. If you are feeling upset, there are two things that we can

do. Firstly, you have the right to stop the interview immediately and at any point that you would like to. In this case we can either wait for you to feel better or we can decide to leave it for good. Secondly, before we have the interviews, you and I will discuss with your parents what to do if you become very upset. You may decide that you would like to see a psychologist on a more ongoing basis. In this event, we will decide the best way to go about finding a psychologist for you to see.

Are there benefits to participating in my research?

Yes. You may benefit from the research by having someone to talk to about your experiences. Your interviews with me may be an opportunity to talk to someone who will not judge you, and who will not reveal your identity to anybody. Also, by participating in my research you will be contributing to what we know about transracially adopted children in South Africa. There has been very little research done on transracially adopted children in South Africa, so you will be contributing valuable knowledge to the area. What we learn from you could help other children in your situation.

Do I have to participate in this research?

No. The decision to participate in this research is completely up to you. If you do not want to participate, that is fine. Unfortunately, your parents have to allow you to participate in the research in order for you to become a participant. If your parents say no, then you will not be able to participate, even if you would really like to. On the other hand, if your parents would like you to, but you do not want to, then the decision rests with you and you will not be forced to participate.

What if I change my mind?

That is fine. If you decide that you are not enjoying your participation in the research or you are finding the research upsetting, then you just need to tell me, and we will not continue with the interviews.

Confidentiality

Everything that you say in the interviews will be kept confidential. By this, I mean that your ideas will be used generally, but will not be specifically linked to you. In order to protect your identity, you will choose a pseudonym (a pseudonym is a name that is a made up). When I refer to you in my research, I will do so by means of your pseudonym and not by your name. In this way, no one will know exactly what you said.

I will not tell your parents any of the details of what you say. It will be up to you to decide how much you would like to tell your parents about the details of the interviews.

### Limits to confidentiality

There will be limits to our confidentiality. By this I mean that there are two circumstances under which I would be obliged to tell your parents about something that you tell me. Firstly, if you tell me that you are suicidal and that you have a plan to kill yourself, then I will have to tell your parents. Secondly, if you are under the age of 16 and you tell me that you have been sexually abused (and you have never told anybody else), then I would be obliged to report this to the police or a social worker.

### Will you get access to the results of my research?

Yes. My thesis will be publicly available in the library of the University of Kwazulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg. In addition to this, I will provide you with an easy-to read summary of the results of my research. Because this is a fairly big project, my thesis will only be finished at the end of the year. I hope that during December 2005 or January 2006, I will be able to provide you with feedback.

### My contact numbers:

Please feel free to contact my supervisor or me if you have any questions:

e-mail:

cell phone:

Supervisor: Mary van der Riet

e-mail:

work phone number:

## Information Sheet: Parents

Thank you for considering allowing your child to participate in my research.

### Who am I?

My name is Robynne Thomson and I am currently in the second year of my master's degree in clinical psychology. In order to qualify as a psychologist I have to write a thesis. A thesis is essentially research that I conduct. After I have done my research I write up my findings, linking them to what has already been learnt about the issue that I am studying. My thesis is supervised by a lecturer at the University of Kwazulu Natal.

### What am I studying?

I am interested in children who have been transracially adopted. That is, children who have been adopted by parents who are of a different race group from themselves. I am interested in finding out how transracially adopted children think and feel about themselves. I would like to know about the kinds of identity issues that transracially adopted children experience.

### How will I do this?

I would like to conduct three interviews with each individual who has been transracially adopted and agrees to participate in my research. In this way, we will get a chance to know each other and will have time to talk about all the things that we would like to talk about. It also gives your child and I a chance to go away and think about things, and to ask questions or change some of our previous responses if we would like to. Each time we meet we will probably spend approximately half an hour together. During the interview, I will tape (onto an audiotape) our conversation. Afterwards, I will transcribe these conversations. This means that I will type the conversations onto a computer, so that I can read what we said.

In addition to meeting with your child, I would also like to meet once with you in order to ask you some questions. I will be asking how you and your family have dealt with the transracial adoption. You will also be able to choose a pseudonym and this interview will also be taped and transcribed.

### Are there risks to my child or myself from participating in my research?

Possibly. Although it is unlikely, it is possible that by talking about your experiences of raising your child, you may become emotionally upset. In addition, there is a small chance that talking about themselves and their experiences may become upsetting for your child.



If you or your child becomes upset, there are two things that we can do. Firstly, you and your child have the right to stop the interview immediately and at any point that you would like to. In this case we can either wait for you to feel better or we can decide to leave it for good. Secondly, before we have the interviews, you and I, together with your child will decide what to do if you or your child becomes very upset. You or your child may decide that you would like to see a psychologist on a more ongoing basis. In this event, we will decide the best way to go about finding a psychologist for you or your child to see.

Are there benefits to my child or myself from participating in my research?

Yes. You and your child may benefit from the research by having someone to talk to about his or her experiences. The interviews with me may be an opportunity for you and your child to talk with someone who will not judge you, and who will keep your identity confidential. Also, by participating in my research you will be contributing to what we know about transracially adopted children in South Africa. There has been very little research done on transracially adopted children in South Africa, so you will be contributing valuable knowledge to the area. What we learn from you could help other children in the same situation.

Do we have to participate in this research?

No. The decision to participate in this research is completely up to both you and your child. If you do not want your child to participate, that is fine. If you as parents do not want to participate, that is also fine. I am willing to interview your child, without interviewing you. If you do not want your child to participate in the research, they will not be allowed to, even if they would like to. On the other hand, if you would really like your child to participate, but they do not want to, then they will not be forced to participate.

What if I change my mind?

That is fine. If you or your child decides that you are not enjoying your participation in the research or that you are finding the research upsetting, then you just need to tell me, and we will not continue with the interviews.

Confidentiality

Everything that you and your child say in the interviews will be kept confidential. By this, I mean that their ideas will be used generally, but will not be specifically linked to them. In order to protect their identity, they will choose a pseudonym (a pseudonym is a name that is a made up). When I refer to them in my research, I will do so by means of their pseudonym and not by their name. In this way, no one will know exactly what they have said.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to tell you any of the details of what your child says. It will be up to your child to decide how much he or she would like to tell you about the details of the interviews.

#### Limits to confidentiality

There will be limits to our confidentiality. By this I mean that there are two circumstances under which I would be obliged to tell you about something that your child told me. Firstly, if your child reveals that they are suicidal and that they have a plan to kill themselves, then I will tell you. Secondly, if your child is under the age of 16 and tells me that they have been sexually abused (and they have never told anybody else), then I would be obliged to report this to the police or to a social worker.

#### Will you get access to the results of my research?

Yes. My thesis will be publicly available in the library of the University of Kwazulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg. In addition to this, I will provide you with an easy-to read summary of the results of my research. Because this is a fairly big project, my thesis will only be finished at the end of the year. I hope that during December 2005 or January 2006, I will be able to provide you with feedback.

#### My contact numbers:

Please feel free to contact my supervisor or me if you have any questions:

e-mail:

cell phone:

Supervisor: Mary van der Riet

e-mail:

work phone number:

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent form: Children

I understand...

1. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I am agreeing to speak about issues relating to my identity as a transracially adopted child
2. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I am agreeing to participate in three interviews with Robynne Thomson
3. That by agreeing to participate in this research I accept that my parents will also be interviewed by Robynne Thomson
4. That by agreeing to participate in this research, there is a small chance that I may become upset
5. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I may have a positive emotional experience and may help other children in my situation
6. That by agreeing to participate in this research, my identity and the exact things that I say will be kept confidential
7. That there are two limits to this confidentiality. These are if I reveal that I am suicidal or if I reveal that I have been sexually abused (and I have never told anybody else)
8. That the results of the research will be written up into a thesis that will be publicly available
9. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I have the right to stop participating in this research at any point that I choose
10. That my participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and that there will be no adverse consequences to me if I choose not to participate in this research

I \_\_\_\_\_ consent to participate in this research project.

Participant  
Sign:

Witness  
Sign:

Date:

Date:

## Informed Consent form: Parents

I understand...

1. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I agree to be interviewed by Robynne Thomson and to talk about mine and my families response to my transracially adopted child
2. That by agreeing to participate in this research, there is a chance that I may become upset
3. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I may have a positive emotional experience and may help other families in our situation
4. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I am agreeing to allow my child to speak about issues relating to his or her identity as a transracially adopted child
5. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I am agreeing to allow my child to participate in three interviews with Robynne Thomson
6. That by agreeing to participate in this research, there is a small chance that my child may become upset
7. That by agreeing to participate in this research, my child may have a positive emotional experience and may help other children in my situation
8. That by agreeing to participate in this research, my and my child's identity and the exact things that I or my child says will be kept confidential
9. That there are two limits to this confidentiality. These are if my child reveals that he or she is suicidal or if he or she reveals that they have been sexually abused (and have never told anybody else).
10. That the results of the research will be written up into a thesis that will be publicly available
11. That by agreeing to participate in this research, I and my child have the right to stop participating in this research at any point that he or she chooses
12. That my and my child's participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and that there will be no adverse consequences to myself or my child if I or my child chooses not to participate in this research

I \_\_\_\_\_ consent to allow my child \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this research project.

Parent of Participant

Sign:

Date:

Witness

Sign:

Date:

## Appendix C

### Child Interview Schedule

Interview 1: Getting to know each other, non-threatening questions that are fairly easy to answer, including obtaining some identifying data. The aim of the first interview is also to get an idea of the kind of contexts that the participant moves in, and the kinds of relationships that she/ he has.

#### Identifying data

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Current grade at school: \_\_\_\_\_  
Religion: \_\_\_\_\_  
Languages spoken: \_\_\_\_\_  
Languages understood: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interests and hobbies (including sport): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1. Can you tell me about your name?
  - a. Who named you?
  - b. Do you like your name?
  - c. Does it have a special meaning?
  - d. If you could change it, what would it be?
2. Where are you at school?
  - a. Do you enjoy school? Why? Why not?
  - b. What are your favorite subjects? Why?
  - c. What are your worst subjects? Why?
  - d. At school, what are you good?
3. Do you have any interests or hobbies that you do after school? What do you enjoy most about these interests or hobbies?
4. Can you tell me about your friends?
  - a. Who do you spend the most time with?
  - b. Who do you feel most comfortable with? Why?
  - c. Are there any groups of people at school (including teachers) who you feel uncomfortable with? Why? Why not?
5. Is there anything else about yourself that you would like to share with me? Are there any questions that you would like to ask me?

**Interview 2: Focuses on the topic of adoption.**

1. Is there anything that you have been thinking about since the last time we met that you would like to share with me?
2. Do you know why you were adopted? If yes, could you tell me the circumstances surrounding your adoption: how did you come to be adopted by your adoptive family?
  - a. How old were you?
  - b. Do you have any contact with your birth family? Why? Why not?
  - c. If yes, do you like having contact with them? Why? Why not?
  - d. If no, would you like to have more contact with them? Why? Why not?
3. Do other people know that you are adopted?
  - a. How do they know?
  - b. How do you feel about them knowing?
  - c. How do they treat you (e.g. the same as any other child or differently?).
  - d. If other people ask if you're adopted, what do you tell them?
4. Can you tell me about your adoptive family?
  - a. What are your relationships with your adoptive family like? Mother? Father? Siblings?
  - b. If you have siblings who are the birth children of your adoptive parents, do you feel different to them? Why? Why not?
  - c. Do you like spending time with your family? Why? Why not?
  - d. Who do you spend the most time with (friends, family, alone)?
5. Thank you for answering all my questions. Is there anything else about yourself that you would like to share with me? Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me?

### Interview 3:

1. Is there anything that you have been thinking about since the last time we met that you would like to share with me?
2. If I asked you to describe yourself to someone who has never met you, how would you describe yourself?
3. Is this easy or difficult? Why? Why not?
4. Do you feel the same, no matter whom you are with and what you are doing?
5. Do you feel different depending on whom you are with and what you are doing?
6. Do you ever find that you talk to yourself in your head? Why? Why not?
7. What are the kinds of things that you say?
8. Do you ever find that you remember what other people have said to you, and you repeat those things in your head? Why? Why not?
9. If you find yourself in a situation where you feel out of place or uncomfortable, how do you deal with it? What are the kinds of things that you say to yourself?
10. Thank you for answering all my questions. Is there anything else about yourself that you would like to share with me? Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me?

## Appendix D

### Parent Interview Schedule

1. What were the circumstances surrounding the adoption of your child?
2. What motivated you to do this transracial adoption?
3. Do you think that there are benefits to adopting a child transracially?
4. What are some of the difficulties or challenges that you have experienced?
5. Do you openly discuss any differences between you and your child? Why? Why not? How?
6. Do you prefer to emphasize the ways in which you are similar? Why? Why not? How?
7. Have you tried to teach your child about his or her birth culture? Why? Why not? How?
8. What kinds of relationships do you have with people who belong to the same race as your child? Would you change anything about these relationships?
9. What school does your child attend?
10. Why did you choose this school?
11. Was racial representation in the school an issue in deciding where your child should go?



## Appendix E

### Worksheet for Reading 1

#### Purpose of Reading:

1. To understand the plot of the story, and the events as they unfold.
2. To locate the participant within the context of the story.
3. To attend to my responses to both the participant and the participant's story. This includes such issues as becoming conscious of the way in which the researcher connects with the participant, and how aspects of the participants story may resonate with the researcher's own personal experience.
4. To identify recurrent images, metaphors and contradictions.
5. Questions to ask at this stage include: What are the events of the story that is being told? What is the main plot and what are the subplots that are nested within this main story? What role does the individual play within this story? How do I respond to the participant on an emotional level? What is my theoretical orientation when responding to the participant? How does my personal history affect my perception of the participant?

## Worksheet for Reading 2

### Purpose of reading:

1. To read for the voice of I.
2. To identify the ways in which the participant speaks feels and thinks about his or herself.
3. To identify shifts between I, we and you, which may suggest shifts in the ways in which the participant perceives herself.
4. Questions to ask at this stage include, how does the participant speak about herself? How does she think and feel about herself? Where does she shift from speaking from an I position to a you or a we position?

## Worksheet for Reading 3

Purpose of reading:

1. To understand some of the contextual factors that impact on the participant and how these may affect how he may think, feel and speak about himself.
2. Questions to ask at this stage include where is the participant at school? What type of school is it and how does this affect how the participant speaks about himself? What kinds of friends does the participant have and how are these friends implicated in the participant's sense of self? What constitutes the participant's immediate family and how may these individuals and the relationships that the participants has with them affect the participant's sense of himself?
3. How do the larger contextual factors impact on the participant? Are there contextual factors specific to South Africa that may affect how the participant thinks and feels about himself?